JOHN of THE WOODS

ABBIE FARWELL BROWN

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JOHN OF THE WOODS

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THE THREE TUMBLERS (*Page 3*)

JOHN·OF·THE·WOODS

BY·ABBIE·FARWELL·BROWN

ILLUSTRATIONS BY
E. BOYD SMITH

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To J. D. and K. D.
Kindest of neighbors and best of friends
to all the world and its
Animal Kingdom

CONTENTS

I. The Tumblers 1

II. The Fall 8

III. The Runaway 12

IV. The Ox-Cart 17

V. The Hunchback 24

VI. The Silver Piece 30

VII. The Wanderer 37

VIII. The Rescue 42

IX. The Animal Kingdom 47

X. The Hermit 52

XI. The Pupil 60

XII. The Bear 65

XIII. A Forest Ramble 72

XIV. The Wolf-Brother 78

XV. The Green Stranger 85

XVI. The Hunt 91

XVII. The Messenger 101

XVIII. The Carrier Pigeon 112

XIX. The Journey 119
XX. The Arrival 129
XXI. The Palace 135
XXII. The Prince's Chamber 142
XXIII. The Cure 149
XXIV. The King 156
XXV. The Fête 167
XXVI. The Talisman 175
Conclusion 186

ILLUSTRATIONS

THE THREE TUMBLERS (page 3) . . . *Frontispiece*

GIGI RUNS AWAY 14

HAVE YOU GOT MY BOY? 24

A QUAINT PAIR OF WANDERERS 44

THE CIRCLE OF ANIMALS WATCHED HIM . . . 62

JOHN TALKED WITH THEM 76

YOU SHALL NOT KILL MY FRIEND THE BEAR . . . 88

THE KING SENDS FOR YOU 108

A STRANGE COMPANY 120

JOHN WAS PROTECTED BY POWERFUL FRIENDS . . . 132

HE STROKED THE SOFT BALL OF FUR 146

I WISH I COULD DO IT MYSELF 152

JOHN URGED THE CLUMSY FELLOW TO DANCE . . 170

TO ME, MY BROTHERS! 178

THE KING AND PRINCESS CAME TO VISIT HIM . . . 186

JOHN OF THE WOODS

I

THE TUMBLERS

IT was late of a beautiful afternoon in May. In the hedges outside the village roses were blossoming, yellow and white. Overhead the larks were singing their happiest songs, because the sky was so blue. But nearer the village the birds were silent, marveling at the strange noises which echoed up and down the narrow, crooked streets.

"Tóm-tom; tóm-tom; tóm-tom"; the hollow thud of a little drum sounded from the market-place. Boys and girls began to run thither, crying to one another: —

"The Tumblers! The Tumblers have come. Hurry, oh, hurry!"

Three little brothers, Beppo, Giovanni, and

Paolo, who had been poking about the market at their mother's heels, pricked up their ears and scurried eagerly after the other children.

Jostling one another good-naturedly, the crowd surged up to the market-place, which stood upon a little hill. In the middle was a stone fountain, whence the whole village was wont to draw all the water it needed. In those long-ago days folk were more sparing in the use of water than they are to-day, especially for washing. Perhaps we should not be so clean, if we had to bring every bucket of water that we used from the City Square!

"Tóm-tom; tóm-tom; tóm-tom"; the little drum sounded louder and louder as the crowd increased. Men and women craned their necks to see who was beating it. The children squirmed their way through the crowd.

On the highest step of the fountain stood a man dressed in red and yellow, with little bells hung from every point of his clothing, which tinkled with each movement he made. In his left hand he held a small drum, from which hung streamers of red and green and

yellow ribbon. This drum he beat regularly with the palm of his skinny right hand. He was a lean, dark man, with evil little red-rimmed eyes and a hump between his shoulders.

"Ho! Men and women! Lads and lasses!" he cried in a shrill, cracked voice of strange accent. "Hither, hither quickly, and make ready to give your pennies. For the tumbling is about to begin,—the most wonderful tumbling in the whole round world!"

Stretching out his arm, he pointed to the group below him. The crowd pressed forward and stood on tiptoe to see better. Beppo and Giovanni and Paolo wriggled through the forest of legs and skirts and came out into the open space which had been left about the fountain. And then they saw what the backs of the butcher and baker and candlestick-maker had hidden from them.

From the back of a forlorn little donkey that was tethered behind the fountain a roll of carpet had been taken and spread out on the ground. Beside this stood the three tumblers. One of them was a thin, dark man,

small and wicked-looking, dressed, like the drum-beater, in red and yellow. The second tumbler was a huge fellow more than six feet tall, with a shaggy mane of black hair. His muscles stood out in great knots under the suit of green tights which he wore.

"A Giant he is! Faith, he could toss me over his shoulder like a meal-bag!" muttered the Blacksmith, who stood with crossed arms looking over the heads of the crowd. "And the wicked face of him! Ugh! I would not wish a quarrel with him!"

But the little boys in the front row were most interested in the third tumbler, who stood between the other two, with his arms folded, ready to begin.

This also was a figure in green, with short trunks of tarnished cloth-of-gold. But beside the Giant, in the same dress, he looked like a pigmy or a fairy mite. This third tumbler was a little fellow of about eight, very slender and childish in form, but lithe and well-knit. Instead of being dark and gypsy-like, as were the other three of the wandering band, this boy was fair, with a shock of golden

hair falling about his shoulders, and with a skin of unusual whiteness, despite his life of exposure to sun and hard weather. And the eyes that looked wistfully at the children in front of him were blue as the depths into which the skylarks were at that moment diving rapturously. On the upper eyelid of the boy's left eye was a brown spot as big as an apple-seed. And this gave him a strange expression which was hard to forget. When he was grave, as now, it made him seem about to cry. If he should smile, the spot would give the mischievous look of a wink. But Gigi so seldom smiled in those days that few perhaps had noted this. On his left cheek was a dark spot also. But this was only a bruise. Bruises Gigi always had. But they were not always in the same place.

"Oh, the sweet Cherub!" said a motherly voice in the crowd. "I wonder if they are good to him. They look like cut-throats and murderers, but he is like the image of the little Saint John in church. Wolves, with a lamb in their clutches! Save us all! Suppose it were my Beppo!"

At these words of his mother's, Beppo giggled, and the boy looked at him gravely. The Hunchback with the drum had heard, too, and darted a furious glance into the crowd where the woman stood. Then, giving a loud double beat on the drum, he signaled for the tumbling to begin.

The three kicked off the sandals which protected their feet, stepped upon the carpet, and saluted the spectators. The Giant stretched himself flat, and, seizing Gigi in his strong arms, tossed him up in the air as one would toss a rubber ball. Up, down, then back and forth between the elder tumblers, flew the little green figure, when he touched ground always landing upon his toe-tips, and finishing each trick with a somersault, easy and graceful. The boy seemed made of thistledown, so light he was, so easily he rebounded from what he touched. The children in the circle about him stared open-mouthed and admiring. Oh! they wished, if only they could do those things! They thought Gigi the most fortunate boy in the world.

But Gigi never smiled. At the end of one

trick the Giant growled a word under his breath, and made a motion at which the boy cringed. Something had gone not quite right, and trouble threatened. He bit his lip, and the performance went on as before.

Now Gigi had to do the most difficult trick of all. With the Giant as the base, and Cecco, the other tumbler, above, Gigi made the top of a living pyramid that ran, turned, twisted, and capered as the great strength of the Giant willed. At a signal they managed somehow to reverse their positions. All stood upon their heads; Gigi, with his little green legs waving in the air, heard shouts of applause which always greeted this favorite act. But the sound gave him no pleasure. He was tired; he was sore from a beating of the previous night, and his head ached from the blow which had made that ugly mark on his cheek. Gigi grew dizzy —

II

THE FALL

SUDDENLY a woman's voice screamed from the crowd:—

"Ah! The Cherub!"

Gigi had fallen from the top of the pyramid. He fell on his shoulder, and for a moment lay still. But presently he was on his feet, kissing his hand prettily to the crowd, and trying to pretend that he had fallen on purpose, as he had been taught. The Giant and Cecco were also quickly on their feet, and the three bowed, side by side, as a sign that the show was over.

Cecco hissed a word into Gigi's ear, and he knew what to fear next. He shuddered and tried to draw aside; but the Giant turned to him, livid with rage, and with one blow of his heavy hand struck him to the ground.

"So! You spoil us again!" he muttered. "You good-for-nothing! I'll teach you! Now take the tambourine and gather up the

coins from the crowd. You 'll get a beating anyway for this. But if you don't take up more than we had at the last town, you 'll have such a trouncing as you never yet knew. Now then!"

Dazed and trembling, Gigi took the tambourine, and, shaking its little bells appealingly, went about among the people. They had already begun to scatter, with the wonderful agility of a crowd which has not paid. Some, however, still lingered from curiosity and with the hope of a second performance. A number of small copper coins jingled into Gigi's tambourine. He approached the good woman who had shown an interest in him. She stooped down and thrust a piece of silver into his hand, whispering, —

"It is for yourself, child. Do not give it to the cruel men! Keep it to spend upon a feast-day, darling!"

Gigi looked at her, surprised. People so seldom spoke kindly to him! The brown spot upon his eyelid quivered. He seemed about to cry. The woman patted him on the head kindly.

"If they are cruel to you, I 'd not stay with them," she whispered. "I 'd run away. — Hey, Beppo! Hey, Giovanni! Paolo!" she called, "we must be off." And she turned to gather up her young ones, who were shouting about the market-place, trying to stand upon their heads as Gigi had done.

Gigi clasped the silver piece tightly in his hand, and went on, shaking the tambourine after the retreating crowd. But few more pennies were coaxed away. Presently he made his way back to the group of tumblers, now seated on the fountain-steps.

"Well, what have you?" growled the Giant. Gigi presented the tambourine with the few pennies rattling around somewhat lonesomely.

"Humph!" snarled Cecco. "Less than last time. Is that all?"

"A beating you get!" roared the Giant.

Gigi shivered. "No, — not all," he said. "Here is a silver piece," and he held out the coin which the kind woman had given him.

"Ah, silver! that is better!" cried Tonio the Hunchback, with his eyes shining greed-

ily. "Give it here"; and he snatched it and thrust it into his pouch. Tonio was the treasurer of the gypsy band. But the Giant had been eyeing Gigi with an ugly gleam.

"He was keeping it!" he growled. "He did not mean to give it up. He would have stolen it!"

"It was mine!" cried Gigi with spirit. "She gave it to me and told me to keep it for a *fiesta*. But I gave it up because — because I did not want to be beaten again."

"You did not give it up soon enough!" roared the Giant, working himself into a terrible rage. "You shall smart for this, you whelp! After supper I will beat you as never a boy was beaten yet. But I must eat first. I must get up my strength. No supper for you, Gigi. Do you watch the donkey here while we go to the inn and spend the silver piece. Then, when we are camped outside the town, —then we will attend to you!"

III

THE RUNAWAY

IT was but a step to the inn around the corner. Off went the three gypsies, leaving Gigi with the donkey beside the fountain. The poor animal stood with hanging head and flopping ears. He too was weary and heart-broken by a hard life and many beatings. His back was piled with the heavy roll of carpet and all the poor belongings of the band, including the tent for the night's lodging. For on these warm spring nights they slept in the open, usually outside the walls of some town. They were never welcome visitors, but vagrants and outcasts.

Gigi sat on the fountain-step with his aching head between his hands. He was very hungry, and his heart ached even more than his head or his empty stomach. He was so tired of their cruelties and their hard ways with him, which had been ever since he could remember. The kind word which the good

woman had spoken to him had unnerved him, too. She had advised him to run away. Run away! He had thought of that before. But how could he do it? Tonio the Hunchback was so wicked and sharp! He would know just where to find a runaway. Cecco was so swift and lithe, like a cat! He would run after Gigi and capture him. The Giant was so big and cruel! He would kill Gigi when he was brought back. The boy shuddered at the thought.

Gigi pulled around him the old flapping cloak which he wore while traveling, to conceal his gaudy tumbler's costume. If he only had that silver piece perhaps he could do something, he thought. Much could be done with a silver piece. It was long since the band had seen one. They would be having a fine lark at the inn, eating and drinking! They would not be back for a long time.

Gigi looked up and around the marketplace. There was no one visible. The crowd had melted as if by magic. Every one was at supper, — every one but Gigi. What a chance to escape, if he were ever to try! The color

leaped into the boy's pale cheeks. Why not? Now or never!

He rose to his feet, pulling his cloak closer about him, and looked stealthily up and down. The donkey lifted his head and eyed him wistfully, as if to say, "Oh, take me away, too!" But Gigi paid no attention to him. He was not cruel, but he had never learned to be kind. Without a pang, without a farewell to the beast who had been his companion and fellow-sufferer for so many long months, he turned his back on the fountain and stole down one of the darkest little side streets.

He ran on down, constantly down, for the village was on the side of a hill, and the market-place was at its top. Around sharp curves he turned, dived under dark archways and through dirty alleys, down flights of steps, until he was out of breath and too dizzy to go further. He had come out on the highroad, it seemed. The little brown cottages were farther apart here. It was more like the country, which Gigi loved. He turned into an enclosure and hid behind a stack of straw, panting.

He wondered if by this time they had dis-

GIGI RUNS AWAY

covered his flight, and he shivered to think of what Tonio and Cecco were saying if it were so. He looked up and down the road. There was something familiar about it. Yes, it was surely the road up which they had toiled that very afternoon, coming from the country and a far-off village. They had been planning to go on from here down the other side of the hill to the next village, Gigi knew. But now would they retrace their steps to look for him?

Just then he spied a black speck moving down the road toward him. Gigi's heart sank. Could they be after him already? He crouched closer behind the straw-stack, trembling. They must not find him!

Nearer and nearer came the speck. At last Gigi saw that it was a cart drawn by a team of white oxen, which accounted for the slowness of the pace. He sighed with relief. This at least he need not fear. As it came nearer, Gigi saw that in the cart were a woman and three little boys of about his own age. And presently, as he watched the lumbering team curiously, he recognized the very woman who

had given him the silver piece an hour before. These, too, were the little boys who had faced him in the crowd. A sudden hope sprang into Gigi's heart. Perhaps she would help him to escape. Perhaps she would at least give him a lift on his way. He decided to risk it.

IV

THE OX-CART

GIGI waited until the cart was nearly opposite, and he could hear the voices of the woman and the children talking and laughing together. Then he crept out from behind the stack and stepped to the side of the road.

The great, lumbering oxen eyed him curiously, but did not pause. The children stopped talking, and one of them pointed Gigi out to his mother.

"Look, Mama! A little boy!"

"Hello!" cried the woman in her hearty, kind voice, stopping the team. "What are you doing here, little lad?"

She did not recognize Gigi at once in his long traveling cloak. But suddenly he threw back the folds of it and showed the green tights underneath.

"Do you remember?" he said. "You told me to run away. Well, I have done it!"

"It is the little tumbler! The tumbler, Mama!" cried the boys in one breath, clapping their hands with pleasure.

But the woman stared blankly. "My faith!" she said at last. "You lost no time in taking the hint. How did you get here so soon? We were homeward bound when you had scarcely finished tumbling. Now here you are before us, on foot!"

"I ran," said Gigi simply. "I came not by the highway, which is long and winding, but down steep streets like stairs, which brought me here very quickly."

"See the bruise on his cheek, mother!" cried Beppo, the littlest boy, pointing. The good woman saw it, and her eyes flashed.

"Oh! Oh!" she clucked. "The wicked men! Did they do that to you?"

"Yes. And they will do more if they catch me now," said Gigi. "I know. They have beaten me many times till I could not move. But if they catch me this time, they will kill me because I ran away. Will you help me?"

"Why, what can I do?" asked the woman

uneasily, looking up and down the road. "If they should come now! You belong to them. I shall get myself into trouble."

Gigi's face fell. "Very well," he said. "Good-by. You were kind to me to-day, and I thought—perhaps—" He turned away, with his lips quivering.

"Stay!" cried the woman. "Where is the silver piece which I gave you? You can at least buy food and a night's lodging with that."

"They took it from me," said Gigi. "I had to give it up because there was so little money in the tambourine, — only coppers. They said people would not pay because I fell; and so they would beat me again."

"They took it from you! The thieves!" cried the woman angrily. "Nay, then I will indeed help you to escape. Climb in here, boy, among my youngsters. We have still an hour's ride down the road, and you shall go so far at least."

Gigi climbed into the cart and nestled down among the children. The woman clucked to the oxen, and forthwith they moved on

down the highroad. The shadows were beginning to darken, and the birds had ceased to sing.

"Hiew! Hiew! Come up! Come up!" the woman urged on the great white oxen. "It is growing late, and the good man will wonder why we are so long returning from market. This has been our holiday," she explained to Gigi. "And to think that the Tumblers should have happened to come to the market this very day! The children will never forget!"

Beppo had been staring at Gigi with fascinated eyes. "How did you learn?" he asked suddenly. "Could I do it too?"

Gigi laughed. For the first time that day his face lost its sadness, and the brown spot on his eyelid, falling into one of the little creases, gave him a very mischievous look. He seemed to wink. Immediately the whole cartful of peasants began to laugh with him, they knew not why. They could not help it. This was what happened whenever Gigi laughed, as he seldom did.

But soon Gigi grew grave once more.

"Why do you want to learn?" he asked. "It does not make me happy. For oh! they are so cruel!"

"Do they beat you much?" asked Paolo sympathetically. Gigi nodded his head with a sigh. "Very much," he said. "I am always black and blue."

"Am I too big to learn?" demanded Giovanni, the oldest boy, who was perhaps twelve and heavier than Gigi. "When did you begin?"

Gigi grew thoughtful. "Ever since I remember, I have tumbled," he said. "Ever since I was a baby, before I could even turn a somersault, they tossed me back and forth between them and made me kiss my hand to the people who stood about."

"And did they beat you then?" asked Beppo, doubling up his fists.

Gigi sighed again. "They always beat me," he said simply. "Whatever I did, they beat me when they were ugly. And that was always."

"Do you belong to them?" asked the woman suddenly. "They are Gypsies, black

men. But you are fair like the people of the North. Where did they get you, Gigi?"

Gigi shook his head. "I do not know," he said. "I have belonged to them always, I think."

"Hark!" said Mother Margherita suddenly. "What 's that?"

There was a faint noise far off on the road behind them. Gigi trembled. "They are coming for me!" he said. "What shall I do?"

"No, no," said the woman. "I do not fear that. It is too soon, surely. But it is growing dark here in the valley. This is a lonely spot, and there are many wicked men about besides your masters, Gigi."

"Thieves and villains!" whispered Giovanni. "Oh, mother, hide the bag of silver that you got at market!"

"Sh! Sh!" warned the mother sharply. "Do not speak of it! Hiew, hiew! Go on! go on!" And she urged the oxen faster.

But the great beasts would not hasten their pace for her. The noise came nearer. They could hear that it was the trotting of hoofs.

"There is only one animal," said Gigi,

whose ears were keen. "I can hear his four feet patter. I think it is the donkey!"

"I can see him now!" cried Paolo. "It is a little man on a donkey. He is bending forward and beating it hard."

Gigi strained his eyes to see. "It is Tonio!" he whispered fearfully. "I know it! Oh, the Hunchback will kill me when he finds me! And he will take your silver, too!"

"Sh! Sh!" commanded the mother. "He shall not find you. Here, take this bag, Gigi. It will be safer with you. And here, creep under my skirts and keep close. He will never guess where you are!"

Mother Margherita spread out her generous draperies, which luckily were both long and wide, and Gigi crept under them, being wholly covered. The other boys huddled close, shivering with a not wholly unpleasant excitement. This was an adventure indeed for a holiday!

The rider drew nearer and nearer, lashing the poor donkey unmercifully. At last they could see his face, red and lowering.

"Halt!" he cried suddenly. "You in the cart there, halt!"

V

THE HUNCHBACK

THE oxen stopped. The cart came to a standstill. The boys huddled closer, and Gigi's heart beat like a tambourine. He was sure that Tonio would hear it.

"What do you want?" asked Mother Margherita, and her usually kind voice was harsh.

"You seem to have a load of young cubs there," shouted Tonio. "Have you got my boy, Gigi the Tumbler, among them? Some one has stolen the little monster."

"What are you talking about!" answered Mother Margherita sharply. "I am a respectable countrywoman returning from market-day with my children. What business have I with tumblers and vagrants!"

"That I 'll see for myself, woman," said Tonio, jumping unsteadily down from the donkey and approaching the cart. Tonio had been drinking, and his little eyes were red and fierce.

HAVE YOU GOT MY BOY?

"Keep your hands off my children!" cried their plucky mother, brandishing her whip. But Tonio was not to be kept away.

"I will see them!" he snarled. He thrust his ugly face into those of the three boys, one after another, eyeing them sharply in the growing darkness. But there was little about these sun-browned, black-eyed youngsters to suggest the slender, fair-haired Gigi.

Tonio peered into the cart. He even thrust his long, lean hand into the straw that covered the floor, and felt about the corners, while the boys wriggled away from his touch like eels from a landing-net. Gigi held his breath. But Mother Margherita would not tamely endure all this.

"Get along, you vermin!" she cried, striking at his hands as he approached the forward end of the cart. "Can't you see that the boy is not here? What would he be doing in my cart, anyway? I'll trouble you to let us go on our way in peace. My man in the house down yonder will be out to help us with his crossbow and his dogs, if we scream a bit louder. Be off with you, and look for your

boy in the village. Is it likely he would have come so far as this, the poor tired little lad?"

"The others are searching the village," growled the Hunchback tipsily. "They'll find him if he's there. 'T is likely you are right. And then! I must be there to help at the punishing. Oh! that will be sport! — Have any other teams passed you on the road?" he asked suddenly. "Have you overtaken no one on foot?"

"We have passed no one," said Mother Margherita truthfully, starting up the oxen. "Hiew! Hiew! Go on! go on," she clucked. "We must get home to bed."

The Hunchback withdrew from the cart unsteadily, and mounted his donkey. For a moment he looked doubtfully up and down the road, then he turned the poor tired animal's head once more toward the village, and they began to plod back up the slope.

"The Lord forgive me!" whispered Mother Margherita piously. "I told a lie, and before my children, too! But it was to spare a child suffering, perhaps death. Surely, the Lord

who loves little children will forgive me this sin."

So the good woman mused, as, faint with terror and gasping for breath, Gigi came out from under her skirts. He handed back the bag of silver, and gave a sigh of relief. The little boys seized him rapturously.

"You are saved, Gigi!" cried Paolo.

"He will never find you now," said Giovanni.

"See, we are almost home! You shall come and live with us and teach us how to tumble!" cried Beppo, hugging his new friend closely. But Mother Margherita interrupted him.

"Not so fast, not so fast, children," she warned. "Gigi is saved for now. But we may be able to do little more for him. Your father is master in the house, remember. Your father may not be pleased with what we have done. Never promise what you may not be able to give, my Beppo." And she fell to musing again rather uneasily.

The boys were all suddenly silent, and Gigi, who had warmed to their kindness, felt a sudden chill. He had not thought of anything

beyond the safety of the moment. He had made no plans, he had only hoped vaguely that these good people might help him. But now, what was to happen next? Was there still something more to fear?

Suddenly the flash of a lantern lighted the road ahead. A man's voice hailed them loudly. "Hello! Hello! Will you never be coming home?"

"Father! It is father!" cried the three boys in an answering shout. Then with a common thought they all stopped short, and Gigi felt them looking at him in the darkness.

"What will he think of Gigi?" he heard Beppo whisper to his brothers.

"Sh!" warned Mother Margherita. And the man's voice sounded nearer.

"Hello, old woman!" it called gruffly. "Well, you did come back, did n't you? I began to believe that you had all run away."

"Run away!" There was a little pause before any one answered. And Gigi felt the elbows of the boys nudging him in the side.

"Father's angry!" they whispered. "Father is terrible when he is angry. You had better look out!"

Then Gigi knew that there was something else to fear that night. And his heart sank. Was there to be no end of his troubles?

VI

THE SILVER PIECE

THE team stopped in front of a stone cottage, from the window of which the light shone hospitably. They all jumped down from the cart, and under cover of the darkness Mother Margherita hustled Gigi with the other boys into the house, while Giuseppe, the father, cared for the oxen.

The mother busied herself in preparing supper, and the boys scattered about on various errands. But Gigi sat in a corner by the fire, too tired to move or speak. He had thrown off his long cloak, and the fire glanced brightly upon the green and gold costume of this quaint little figure, so out of place in the simple cottage. Presently Giuseppe entered with a heavy tread, and paused in amazement at what he saw on his hearthstone.

"Hello!" he cried gruffly. "What's this?"

Mother Margherita came forward quickly. "It is a little tumbler," she said. "We saw

him do his tricks at the market to-day. The Gypsies beat him, and he has run away. Let us give him at least supper and a shelter for the night, Giuseppe?" Her tone was beseeching.

"Hum!" grumbled Giuseppe doubtfully. "A runaway! A tumbler! A thief, I dare say, as well. A pretty fellow to bring into an honest man's house! His master will be after him, and then we shall all get into trouble for sheltering a runaway. Margherita, you were always a foolish woman! Is this all you have to show for market-day? Where is the money?"

"Here it is, Giuseppe," said the mother, handing him the bag of silver, which he thrust into his pocket. "Now let us have supper. You can count the silver afterward, and we will tell you about everything when that is over."

With a very bad grace the father watched the little stranger timidly take his place at the board between Paolo and Giovanni, Beppo crying because he could not have the tumbler next to him also.

There was much to talk about at that meal. They had to describe the holiday at market, which was a great event for the little family. Then there were the Tumblers; and the adventure of Gigi and the Hunchback,—that was the most exciting of all. And how near they came to losing the bag of silver which they had earned by selling their vegetables at the market! Giuseppe asked Gigi many questions, not unkindly, but with a bluntness that made the boy wince. And often Mother Margherita spoke up for him, with a kind answer. Gigi grew paler and paler, and his food lay almost untouched on his plate. He was too tired to eat.

At last, when supper was finished, Mother Margherita rose and lighted a candle. "Come with me, Gigi," she said, "and I will show you where you are to sleep this night."

Gigi followed her readily, glad to escape further questioning, and eager to rest his aching head. The little boys called after him a hearty good-night. But Giuseppe saw him go without a word, casting sidewise looks after the retreating figures, and grunting sourly.

There was no room for Gigi in the loft where the family slept. But out in the stable, beside the oxen, was a fresh pile of straw, a fine bed for the tired little wanderer. When Mother Margherita had bidden him a kind good-night and had closed the stable door behind her, Gigi threw himself upon the straw and was almost instantly asleep. The oxen breathed gently beside him, chewing their cud. Everything was still and peaceful. And the night passed.

"Cock-a-doodle-doo!" crowed the first cock, speaking the same tongue that he learned at the beginning of the world, and that he always uses in every land, among every people.

It was but a few moments later when Gigi was awakened suddenly by a touch on his shoulder. The boy opened his eyes and stared about, bewildered. He did not know where he was. Who was this bending over him in the dim light? Not Tonio; not Cecco; not the Giant? Then he recognized Mother Margherita, stooping low with a pitiful expression on her face. She had a little bundle in her hand.

"Get up, Gigi," she whispered. "You must

be off. My man is so angry! He vows he will take you to the village to-day and give you up to your masters. He thinks you are a thief, Gigi. But I do not believe that you stole the silver piece."

"The silver piece!" cried Gigi, still more bewildered.

"Sh!" cautioned the woman, laying a hand on his lips. "Giuseppe must not know that I am here. He sleeps still. When we counted the money in the bag we found it short by one piece of silver, besides the one I gave you. That was my own to do with as I chose. But he believes that you stole another when you were holding the bag for me, hiding under my skirts."

"I did not take it!" cried Gigi, wide-awake now. "Oh, I would not steal from you, — not from you, the only person who was ever kind to me!"

"There, there! I told him so!" said the good woman soothingly. "I told him I must have lost it at the market when I was making change for somebody. But he will not believe. You must be off, Gigi, before he wakes, or you

will have to go back to those cruel fellows. Giuseppe is so set! Like a mule he is when he is angry!"

Gigi sprang to his feet and looked wildly around. "Where shall I go? What shall I do?" he asked.

Mother Margherita looked at the pale little lad and her eyes filled. "Poor little fellow!" she sighed. "Suppose you were one of my boys, Beppo or Paolo! But we must lose no time"; and she dashed the tears from her eyes. "Here is your cloak to hide that gaudy dress. And here is a bundle of food,—all I could spare without the good man's knowledge. For it must seem that you have run away of your own accord. I know that will make him sure that you are a thief. But I dare not let him guess that I have warned you and helped you to escape. You do not know Giuseppe's anger! —Farewell, dear little lad, and may the Saints have you in their keeping."

She led him to the door and pointed out the direction, in the gray dawn. She showed him where, to the north, by a great tree, a lane branched from the highroad. "Follow that,"

she said. "It will be safer in case you are pursued. And it comes at last to the great road into another country. There perhaps you will be safe and find friends who can help you more than I have done. Though none can wish you better." And she hugged him close. "Farewell, Gigi!"

VII

THE WANDERER

WITH a lump in his throat, Gigi left the only roof that had ever shown him kindness. In the gray dawn he crept out to the highroad. There was no time to be lost, for already the east was growing pink, and soon the sun would be making long shadows on the open road. Giuseppe would surely spy him and bring him back.

As soon as he was outside the farm enclosure, Gigi began to run. But he found that he was stiff and sore from his fall of the day before, and from the many beatings which he had received of late. Every bone in his body ached, and especially his head, which throbbed so as to make him faint. Still he ran on. For more than anything else he feared being captured and sent back to the Gypsies.

At last Gigi came to the great tree where branched the cross-road to the north. Here he turned aside. Then he drew a deep breath,

feeling safer. He ceased running, and presently, being hungry and tired, he sat down upon a stone and opened the bundle which Mother Margherita had given him. He found bread and cheese, and began to eat greedily, until he remembered that he knew not where he should find dinner and supper. He looked at the remnant of bread and cheese longingly, but at last wrapped it up and put it back into the little pouch which, as was the custom in those times, he wore at his belt.

The lane upon which he was now traveling was shadier than the highroad, and as he went on the trees grew even taller and bigger. Apparently the way was leading through the outskirts of a forest. The lane was more crooked, also. Gigi could not see far either before or behind him, because of the constant turnings.

Suddenly, he stopped short and listened. There was a sound; yes, there certainly was a sound on the road behind him,—the noise of galloping hoofs.

Gigi was seized with a panic. Without stopping to think, he plunged from the road into the forest, and began to run wildly through the

underbrush. He did not care in which direction he went,—anywhere, as far as possible from the pursuing hoof-beats.

On, on he plunged, sometimes sprawling over roots of trees, sometimes bruising himself against low branches or stumbling upon stones which seemed to rise up on purpose to delay him; torn by briars and tripped by clutching vines. But always he ran on and on, this way and that, wherever there seemed an opening in the forest, which was continually growing denser and more wild.

How long he wandered he did not know. The sun was high in the heavens when at last, wholly exhausted, Gigi fell upon a bank of moss. His weary bones ached. He was too tired to move, but lay there motionless, and presently he fell into a troubled sleep. When he awoke with a start, it was growing dark, and he was very hungry. He felt for the pouch into which he had put his bits of bread and cheese, but it was gone! He must have lost it when pushing through the bushes.

What was he to do? He knew he must find his way back to the highroad, where he could

perhaps beg a supper at some cottage. But how was he to know which way to go? He looked up and around him in despair. He was in the midst of the wildest kind of forest. The trees grew close together, and there was no path, no sign that men had ever passed this way.

Moreover, it was growing darker every minute. Already the shadows behind the trees were black and terrible. Gigi suddenly remembered that there were fierce animals in the forests. In those days, all over Europe bears and wolves and many kinds of wild beasts, large and small, wandered wherever there were trees and hiding-places; in fact, one might meet them anywhere except in cities and towns. And sometimes in winter, when they were very hungry, bold wolves prowled even in the market-places.

Gigi shuddered. He dared not think of sleep, alone in this dreadful place. He must try to find the road. Once more he crawled to his feet and began to stagger through the darkness, groping with his hands to ward off the branches which scratched his face and the thorns which tore his garments into rags.

Now there began to be strange sounds in the forest. The birds had ceased to sing, save for a chirp now and then as Gigi's passing wakened some tired songster. But there were other noises which Gigi did not understand, and which set his heart to knocking fearfully; the cracking of twigs far off and near at hand; little scurries in the underbrush as he approached; now and then the crash of something bounding through the bushes in the distance; sometimes a squeak or a chatter which sounded terrible to the little boy's unaccustomed ears. And finally, far off in the forest, came a long, low howl that set his teeth to chattering.

Was it a wolf? The thought was more than Gigi could bear. He fainted, and fell forward into a bed of soft green moss.

VIII

THE RESCUE

GIGI must have lain all night where he fell. For when he opened his eyes the sun was shining dimly through the dense leaves of the tree overhead. He remembered only the last thing he had heard before his eyes closed, — that long howl in the darkness. So it was with a thrill of terror that he felt a strange touch on his face. Something warm and wet was passing over his cheek. Something soft and warm was cuddling close to his side. He thrust out his hand feebly, groping at something to help him rise. His fingers closed in thick, soft hair. Suddenly Gigi knew what was happening to his face. Some big animal was licking it with a coarse but gentle tongue!

Was it the wolf that had howled? A dreadful thought! Gigi screamed aloud. He struck at the creature with all the strength he had, which was little enough.

"Get away! Go along with you!" he cried in Gypsy gibberish.

In answer, the animal uttered a whine, very gentle, very piteous; and it began to lick the hand which had struck it.

Gigi's eyes had now grown used to the half-light. Suddenly he saw what had lain beside him, keeping him warm all night. It was a great shaggy dog, brown and white. Around his neck was a heavy collar of leather studded with nails. Gigi did not like dogs. The only ones he knew had always chased the Tumblers and barked at them as they entered or left a village. Sometimes they had snapped at Gigi's heels so viciously that he had cried out. And then Cecco would cuff him for making a fuss.

But this dog seemed friendly. He looked up in Gigi's face, and wagged his tail pleasantly. He whined and put his nose in Gigi's hand; then he got to his feet and ran away a few steps, looking back at the boy and waiting. Gigi did not know what it meant. But when the dog saw that the boy was not following, he went back and repeated his action. Several times he did this, and still Gigi lay looking

at him, too tired and too weak to make an effort, even to think. At last the dog came back once more. This time he took Gigi's hand between his teeth, very gently, and began to pull him in the direction toward which he had first gone. Then Gigi knew. The dog was trying to lead him somewhere!

A throb of hope warmed his heart. Perhaps this was a friend who would bring him out of the dreadful forest to some place where he could eat. For oh, he was so hungry! He dragged himself to his feet, and tried to follow, leaning a hand on the dog's neck. The creature was wild with joy, and began to bark and wag his tail furiously. Even this motion made the boy totter, he was so weak. He took a few steps, then he had to stop. He was sore all over, dizzy and faint. He lay down on the ground with his head between his hands. And once more the good dog crept near and poked his wet nose into Gigi's face, licking his cheek.

The boy reached out a hand and patted him timidly. It was the first time Gigi had ever felt friendly toward an animal!

A QUAINT PAIR OF WANDERERS

When the dog found that it was of no use to try to lead Gigi on, he sat still and seemed to think for a few moments. Then he came close and crouched in the moss beside Gigi, whining softly and rubbing his nose against the boy's knee. Evidently he wanted his new friend to do something. The boy looked at him wearily, and wondered. He took hold of the collar about the dog's neck. Yes! that was it! The dog barked and wagged his tail, but did not move. He was still waiting. Gigi looked at the big fellow lying there. He was almost as large as the little donkey who bore the luggage of the Tumblers upon their journeys. He was big enough to carry Gigi himself. Was that what the creature meant?

Gigi lifted one leg over the dog's back, keeping hold of the collar as tightly as he could. The animal rose to his feet with a glad bark. Yes, this was what he wanted. He began to move forward slowly, for Gigi was a heavy burden and his feet nearly touched the ground.

Slowly they moved through the forest, a quaint pair of wanderers. Sometimes Gigi felt faint and ill, and lay forward, resting his

head on the dog's soft neck. Sometimes they stopped to rest. Then Gigi lay flat on the moss, with the dog stretched out close to his side. But they were both unwilling to waste many minutes so.

IX

THE ANIMAL KINGDOM

PRESENTLY Gigi and the dog came to a clearing in the forest. All about was as wild as anything they had passed. But here, quite alone, stood a little hut made of logs and branches twisted together.

The first thing that Gigi saw, after the hut itself, was an old man in a coarse gray gown, sitting on a stump, reading a book. His head was bare, and he had a long white beard. His feet were bare, too, and he wore leather sandals. A rope was tied about his waist. Gigi had sometimes seen men so dressed plodding along the highroad or begging from the townsfolk. If he thought about them at all, he believed them to be some rival sort of performers, like the Tumblers themselves. It seemed very queer to see one of the Gray Men here in the lonely forest, — and with such strange companions! Gigi stared and stared again, rubbing his tired eyes to make sure that they saw aright.

On the old man's knees was curled, asleep, a comfortable white cat. Three little kittens played with the knotted ends of his girdle, swarming up and down the gray gown of the reader. On his shoulder perched a squirrel, busily eating a nut which he held in his little paws. Close by, a brown and white deer grazed about the door of the little hut. A great black raven hopped gravely about the old man's feet, now and then picking up a bug. Lying peacefully asleep in front of the hut door, like a yellow mat of fur, a fox was stretched. In and out among the rose-bushes of a tiny garden which was planted beneath the window of the hut, hopped several brown hares, seeming much at home. The old man's head nodded forward on his book. He could sleep soundly, it seemed, with all these little live things swarming about him. Even as his gray locks swept the page, a thrush fluttered down and lighted gently on the bald crown, beginning to sing so sweetly that Gigi held his breath.

All this the boy saw in that first glimpse before he and the dog parted the bushes and came out into the clearing. In that instant every-

thing changed. The dog gave a sharp bark of pleasure. The old man let the book fall from his hand, and sat staring. The animals leaped from their slumbers and scuttled away in every direction, some into the hut, some into the neighboring bushes, some melting as if by magic into the forest. The squirrel and the thrush took shelter in the treetops. Only the raven, with ruffled feathers, remained at the old man's side, turning a fierce little eye upon the newcomer.

By this time Gigi had thrown himself from the dog's back, and stood feebly leaning against a tree. Released from his burden, the dog bounded forward, and was soon leaping upon the old man's shoulders, covering his face and hands and feet with eager kisses.

"Down, Brutus, down!" said the old man, in a tongue which Gigi could not understand. "Where hast thou been so long, good dog? And what new pet hast thou brought for my colony?" He looked towards Gigi with keen, kind eyes. "Come hither, my lad," he said in the same tongue.

But Gigi only stared, not understanding. He

was growing afraid of this queer old man, who spoke a strange language and had wild animals for his friends; who read, too, in a great black book! Gigi had heard of wicked wizards and sorcerers, and he believed that he saw one now. He turned about and tried to run away. But his poor head grew dizzy, and before he knew it he had fallen, and lay sobbing and shivering, unable to rise.

Presently he felt the dog's gentle tongue licking his face. A moment after, kind, strong arms lifted him and bore him into the little hut. The old man laid Gigi on a cot beside the window, and after laying his hand on the boy's head and wrist, went away and returned with something in a cup.

"Drink this, my child," he said. And this time Gigi understood. He drank and felt better. Then the old man asked him in the tongue which Gigi knew, "Are you hungry, lad?"

The boy nodded, and his eyes must have told how nearly starved he was. The old man went swiftly to a little cupboard in the wall, and soon came back with bread and milk in an earthen bowl.

"Eat," he said, lifting Gigi's head on his arm. "Eat this good bread, my son, and drink the warm milk of my friend the doe, which I had just set aside, not expecting you. Then you shall sleep here on my pallet. And soon we shall be right smiling and happy all!"

The kind old eyes beamed on Gigi while he devoured his breakfast like a starved animal, without a word of thanks. When he had finished, the kind old hands brought water and bathed the tired body, bound up the bleeding hands and feet with refreshing ointment, and laid Gigi back again to rest upon the cot beside the rose-screened window.

There Gigi lay and slept; slept and dreamed; dreamed and went over again by fits and starts the strange adventures of the past two days. But strangest of all, though by far the pleasantest, was that picture which he had seen when he came out into the clearing upon the back of Brutus. And this picture, with queer variations, filled the foreground of Gigi's dreaming.

X

THE HERMIT

They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.—HOLY WRIT.

FOR three days Gigi lay on the pallet of the good Hermit, near to death. And for three days the great dog lay on guard by his side. The Hermit went softly to and fro, taking tender care of the boy and giving him medicine made from wonderful herbs which he had found in the woods. Often he knelt in a corner of the hut, before a rude wooden Cross, and said prayers; this seemed to give him strength for his work and hope for its result. So that when he rose, his face would be bright and happy.

This was he doing the third morning when Gigi awoke, feeling better. The ache was gone from his limbs and the dizziness from his head. He awoke with a long sigh, and for the first

time since he lay down on the Hermit's pallet he looked around him with interest. At first he did not know where he was.

The hut was small and bare. In one corner was a cupboard where the Hermit kept his scanty supply of food and the medicines which he distilled. Against the wall was a bench, beside a table made of a tree-stump, and on the table lay a great black book. Opposite the bed was the Cross of wood fastened to the wall, and below it the good Hermit knelt with bowed head. Gigi wondered what he was doing. He himself knew no prayers.

Gigi's eyes wandered to the door, which stood open. On the sill the cat and her kittens were playing. Outside he could catch a glimpse of various animals frisking about the dooryard. Birds sang merrily in the trees overhead and in the bushes just outside the window. The raven hopped into the doorway and stood looking saucily at Gigi, with head on one side. It was all so peaceful, so quiet, so different from anything which Gigi had known, that he thought it must be a dream. He sighed again, and turned over, stretching

out his arm. In doing so he touched the hairy neck of Brutus, who was still sleeping by his bed. Instantly the dog sprang up and began to lick the boy's face. At the same moment, with a pious gesture, the Hermit also rose and came toward the cot, smiling kindly.

"You are better, my son?" he asked, laying a cool hand upon Gigi's forehead. "Ah, yes! You will soon be quite yourself."

Gigi stared up at him contentedly. "Who are you?" he asked. He had never been taught manners, and he could no longer hide his curiosity.

"I am a Hermit," answered the old man. "I live here alone with my animals, as you see. I pass the days in prayer and meditation, studying the Lord's Holy Book and the living works of His hands."

"Why do you live away from men?" asked Gigi again.

The Hermit's face grew sad.

"Men are wicked and cruel, child," he said. "Men hurt and kill one another. They love to slay the innocent animals for sport. In their kingdoms is no love. I have made myself

here an animal kingdom, where all is love and peace."

"Do all animals know you?" asked Gigi, wondering.

"With time I can make friends with them all," said the Hermit, smiling. "One has but to love and understand and be patient. See!"

He gave a peculiar call. Instantly there came tumbling into the hut, until it nearly overflowed, a strange medley of creatures, — hares, mice, birds, kittens, squirrels. Last of all peered into the doorway a deer and her little speckled fawn.

The dog sat quite still, not moving a muscle. He had been trained not to frighten his more timid neighbors.

"Follow the example of Brutus, my son," said the Hermit gently. "Make no sudden movement and do not speak. They know my voice, and they will learn yours. But you are still a stranger to them, and must expect them to be shy."

The animals crowded lovingly about the Hermit, some springing upon his shoulders and knees, the birds flitting about his head.

Gigi thought he had never seen so wonderful a sight. "Oh!" thought he, "if I could only do this, what money might I not take from a crowd on market-days!"

After talking to his pets and caressing them tenderly, the old man dismissed them to the outdoor sunshine, so that he was alone with Gigi, who could then be free to move and speak once more.

"The beloved innocents!" said the Hermit, with a sigh. "Who could ever willfully injure one of them, God's creatures?—But now, my son, tell me about yourself," he broke off. "Who are you? Whence do you come? Whither are you going?"

"I do not know," said Gigi simply, in answer to all three questions. And then he told his story as he had told it to Mother Margherita.

The old man listened pitifully. "Poor little lad!" he said. "Men have been cruel to you, also. You have no home, no friends, no past, and no future. What shall we do with you?"

"Oh, let me stay with you!" cried Gigi, clasping his hands. "You are so good and wise.

Teach me! Teach me to be good and wise, too. Take me into your animal kingdom, and teach me to make them all my friends. I could do such tricks with them, — far better than tumbling. I should grow rich!"

The old man shook his head. "That cannot be," he said. "I cannot teach men to grow rich. Nor would I see my animals made ridiculous for money. I came here to be a hermit. I vowed to have nothing more to do with human folk, only with the animals whom they persecute. But I never thought that a child would seek my roof."

He looked at Gigi doubtfully. The boy returned the look, and the brown spot on his eyelid trembled piteously. The Hermit blinked.

"Yes, you are a poor little animal, too," he said at last. "You are ignorant and innocent as they. I cannot turn you away. Perhaps I can teach you better things than tricks. Perhaps I can make you a disciple and a Christian. If you are teachable, I can make you wise with the knowledge of herbs and healing. If I send back to the world which I have left one man useful, tender, strong, and good, perhaps he may

be able to do more than I have done to stay the march of evil."

Gigi did not understand the words at all, but the tone was kind. He pushed the bandage from his head, looked up at the Hermit, and smiled his own strange smile. "I think you will not beat me,' he said. The brown spot on his eyelid gave him the wink of mischief.

"Beat you!" The old man's face broke into an answering smile, and he rocked to and fro with pleasure in Gigi's little joke. Then he bent forward suddenly, and stared into the boy's face with a keen look.

"The wicked eye of him!" he said, talking to himself. "How like it is! Strange, strange! About nine years old, he is. Nine years ago—" He paused, gazing at Gigi, and murmuring under his breath. "What are you wearing about your neck?" he asked suddenly.

Gigi put his hand to a tiny silver chain which just peeped above his green doublet, and drew out a flat piece of silver of strange shape, and with one side carved deeply with a notched Cross.

"Where did you get this?" asked the Hermit, strangely excited.

"I do not know," said Gigi, wondering. "I have worn it always. Not even Cecco dared take it from me. I have heard him say so. But I do not know why!"

"The lost one!" cried the Hermit, embracing Gigi, with tears in his eyes. Then, crossing himself, he added piously, "Dear little lad! We are in the Lord's hands. Gigi, you shall stay with me until the time is come. But you wear the Cross, a blessed emblem. I shall call you no more by that heathen Gypsy name. You shall bear the beloved Christian name of John, to which perhaps you have as good a right as any. Ah! I will not tell you more. I will wait until I see if you be worthy indeed. If not — his son shall never know!"

All this Gigi did not understand. But he was happy to know that he might stay. And he began his new life as one of the Hermit's animal kingdom by hugging close old Brutus, his first four-footed friend, who had brought him safely to this haven.

XI

THE PUPIL

But ask now the beasts and they shall teach thee, and the fowls of the air and they shall tell thee. — Holy Writ.

GIGI the Gypsy was now become John; no longer an outcast and a wanderer, but a happy little Christian boy. Surely no child ever lived so strange a life as he. Surely no boy ever had such queer playmates, or studied in so wild a school.

First of all he had to become acquainted with his oddly-mixed family of two-footed and four-footed brothers. Brutus was his friend from the beginning. The great dog seemed to have adopted for his very own the boy whom, led by some kindly angel, he had found that night in the forest. But the other creatures were shy at first. They ran at the sound of John's shrill boyish voice, and shrank from his quick movements. They hid in the bushes when he came dashing and dancing into the clearing

after a romp with Brutus, and it would take some patience to coax them back again.

John saw that this troubled the good old Hermit, whom he loved better every day, and he tried to imitate his teacher's gentle voice and manner and his soft tread. The little tumbler was himself light as a feather, and graceful as the deer, his new-found sister. He was quick to learn and naturally gentle, though his cruel life had made him careless and rough. Soon he had made friends with all the Hermit's pets, so that they knew and loved him almost as well as they did the master of this forest-school.

In his green doublet and hose, clumsily patched with pieces of gray serge from the Hermit's own cloak, John rambled about the wild woods, looking like one of the fairy-folk of whom legends tell. Often he went with the wise old man, who gave him lessons of the forest which he knew so well. John learned to steal on tiptoe and surprise the ways of the wood-folk, — the shy birds and the shyer little brothers who live in the moss and mould. He grew wise in the lore of flowers and herbs, and

could tell where each one grew and when it blossomed, and which ones, giving their life-blood for the sake of men, could cure disease and bring comfort to the ailing. At night they watched the moon and the far-off, tiny stars. These, too, became friends, many of them known to John by name. He loved each one, for the Hermit said that they also were his brothers and sisters, like the birds and beasts and fishes; all being the children of that Father who had made this beautiful world to be the home where all should live together.

But the book of Nature was not all that John studied in these days. He learned to read also the written language of men, and studied the wise and holy words which have kept goodness before men's sight since knowledge began. Until now John had never opened a book or held a pen. But the Hermit taught him wisely and well, and soon he was in a fair way to become a scholar.

A busy life he led, what with his studies indoors and out and his duties about the hut, —for the Hermit taught him to be deft in all tasks, however simple and homely. John could

THE CIRCLE OF ANIMALS WATCHED HIM

cut up firewood or cook a porridge with as happy a face as he wore when he played with Brutus or sang the morning hymn of praise at the good Hermit's side.

One thing his teacher would not have him forget. He must practice his tumbling every day. For the Hermit said, "No skill once learned will ever come amiss, my son. You spent years and suffered hardly to gain this agility. It seems to me not frivolous nor undignified, but a beautiful thing, to keep one's body lithe and graceful even as are the free-natured animals. Then practice, John; and some day even this skill may not come amiss."

So the boy practiced daily in front of the cabin. He danced and tumbled; he turned somersaults and stood on his head; he leaped with a pole and swung nimbly as a monkey from the limbs of the overhanging trees. And the circle of animals watched him gravely, marveling no doubt at the strange antics of their brother; but, being now used to his voice and manner, neither annoyed nor shocked by anything which he might do.

When the day was over, John would throw

himself on a soft bed of moss under a tree, beside the Hermit seated on a log. Then they would read or talk, and tell stories of what they had seen in the world of men. Brutus would be curled down between them. Blanche and her kittens, big and little, would play with John's hair as he lay there. The squirrel, perched on the boy's doubled-up knees, would chatter and crack nuts. The brown hares would run to and fro over his feet, while the doe and her little fawn nibbled the grass close by, listening to the sound of the human voices as though they liked it.

What a happy home it was! John wondered if ever any boy was so lucky as he.

XII

THE BEAR

JOHN had grown to love the little four-footed brothers dearly, and they were great friends of his. But still the Hermit seemed to have a charm about him which John lacked, and which drew even the strange new creatures to him and made them trust him from the first. John longed to learn this secret. But when he asked the old man about it he looked at the boy kindly and said, —

"It will come, my son, with time. Love, live, and learn."

John had been with the Hermit some months, when happened an adventure that interested him more than anything which had befallen. He was walking one day with the old man in a part of the forest far distant from their hut. They were looking for a rare and wonderful herb which the sage needed to distill a certain precious balm.

"This should be the spot," said the old man,

going toward a heap of rocks around which grew a tangle of shrubs and creepers. "The plant which I seek is shy, and hides in the shadows of sheltered places. Yonder is a cave, where first I made my dwelling when I came to the forest, before I built the hut in which we now live. And at the entrance, I remember, grew the herb of grace, which more than once has done me service in healing the hurts of my pets."

The Hermit plunged eagerly forward to the rocks. John followed close behind. At the entrance to the cave the old man stooped to pluck the herb which they had come so far to seek, and John, clambering beside him, bent curiously to peer into the cave. Suddenly a sound from within made him start. The Hermit paused in his task, and both stared motionless into the blackness of the cave. Presently the sound came again, — a deep growl ending in a whine.

"Some animal in pain," whispered the Hermit to John. "Stay you here, my son. I will discover what it may be."

"Nay, father!" pleaded the boy. "It may

be some fierce creature; it may hurt you. Do not go!"

The old man turned beaming eyes upon him. "Never yet have I been hurt by an animal," he said gently. "My body bears only the scars of human hands. I am not afraid. But do you stay here, my son. You have not yet quite learned the language of dumb things."

"I shall go with you!" said John to himself. He seized the staff which the Hermit had dropped, and followed close upon his heels.

Soon their eyes became more used to the darkness of the cave, with which the Hermit was already familiar. Presently out of the shadows in a far corner they spied two red eyes glaring upon them. Behind the eyes bulked a huge, apparently shapeless form. It half rose as they drew near, and again they heard the growl of anger. But as the creature made a sudden movement, the growl turned into a howl of agony, and it rolled back into the corner, whimpering.

John plucked the Hermit by his robe. "It is a bear!" he said. "I have met them sometimes upon the highways, traveling with

mountebanks. And the men told me that they were very fierce and hard to tame. Be careful, my father! Go not near, I beseech you!"

But the old man paid no heed to his words. Bending forward, he made a strange sound in his throat, a soothing, cooing noise. The bear heard it, and ceased to whine. They saw the ugly head rear up and look at the Hermit wildly. Again he made the sound, and stooping without fear brought his face close to the bear's great body. The animal did not move.

Presently the Hermit turned to John. "The poor beast has a wounded paw," he said. "An arrow has hurt it badly."

He unfastened from his girdle a cup which he always carried in his wanderings.

"Here, my son," he said, "fill this at the spring which we passed yonder. The creature suffers from thirst."

John hesitated. "Is it safe to leave you here alone with this wild beast?" he asked.

The Hermit smiled. "Quite safe," he said. "Do you think I need your protection? Brother Bear will soon know me for his friend."

When John returned he found the Hermit

sitting on the floor of the cave, with the bear's paw resting on his knee. The animal was quiet, save for a whimpering now and then. John could see his little red eyes fixed upon the Hermit with a curious look of wonder and appeal. He seemed unable to move, and the Hermit touched the beast quite naturally, as if he were a great kitten. The bear stirred and turned his eyes when John entered.

"Thanks, son," said the Hermit, taking the cup from the boy's hand; and, turning again to the bear, he held it to the animal's mouth. "Drink, brother," he said.

Eagerly the bear lapped up the water.

"Now, my son," said the Hermit to John, "go you to the entrance of the cave and pluck me a handful of the healing herb-leaves. I must bind up this suffering paw."

"Surely, father," begged John, "you will not try to touch the creature's wound. He will tear you to pieces!"

The old man turned reproachful eyes upon him. "Son," he said, "I have tried to teach you obedience. Go, get me the leaves."

Without more words John hastened to do

as he was bid. When he returned with a handful of the plant, he found that the Hermit had bathed the wounded paw of the now quiet animal. He had torn a strip of linen from the shirt which he wore under his gray robe, and was making this into a bandage. Soon he had crushed the leaves and had bound them upon the foot of the bear, who lay still and gentle under his hands. John stared, amazed.

"Now we will go home," said the Hermit softly, "and you, John, shall return with food for this poor hungry brother. You will soon make him your dear friend also. For, you see, he asks only love and patience. Men have been cruel to him. But we will be kind to our Brother Bear."

Thus John learned a new lesson of courtesy to the wilder, bigger beasts. That same day he made the long journey a second time, bringing the bear his dinner, with a comb of wild honey which the Hermit had found on the way home. And he had the joy of seeing the creature act no longer like an enemy, but like a timid friend.

Day after day John went and ministered to

the sick animal. At last, there came a joyous time when the bear rose to greet him on his approach. The injured paw was healed. And when John left the cave that night, the bear hobbled at his heels, even to the clearing where the Hermit lived. He would not go farther at that time. He sat down on his haunches outside the border of tall trees, and when John tried to coax him he looked at the hut doubtfully. At the sight of Brutus he made lumberingly away.

A few evenings later, the bear came of his own accord to beg for his supper; and at last this became a custom. Soon he also was accounted a member of the animal kingdom, and became good friends with them all. In time John taught him many tricks, such as he had seen the mountebanks do with their traveling bears. But unlike them, John taught only by kindness; and his bear learned the faster.

XIII

A FOREST RAMBLE

"FATHER," said John one summer afternoon, when his tasks for the day were quite finished, "Brutus and I are going for a long walk."

"Very well, my son," answered the Hermit. "I will bide here and read my book, for the heat has made me somewhat weary. But see that you return before sunset."

"Yes, father," said John.

Slinging over his shoulder a little basket in which to fetch home any strange plants which he might find in the forest, John whistled to Brutus, and the pair trotted away together as they loved to do. The Hermit looked after them, and smiled.

"John is a good boy," he said. "One day he will be a fine man. May the Saints help me to make him worthy of his father and of the name he bears." Then he turned to his beloved book.

John and Brutus went merrily through

the forest, the boy singing under his breath snatches of the cheerful hymns that he and the Hermit loved. The dog ran ahead, exploring in the bushes, sometimes disappearing for long minutes at a time, but ever returning to rub his nose in John's hand and exchange a silent word with him. They were not going for any particular errand to any especial spot. They were just rambling wherever the forest looked inviting; which is the nicest way to travel through the woods, — especially if one of you can be trusted to find the way home, however wavering may be the trail that you leave behind. It was what John loved to do more than anything in the world.

The woods were cool and green and full of lovely light. It was so still and peaceful, too! The tiny queer noises all about, which once, before he knew the kingdom of the forest, had frightened him so much, now filled John with the keenest joy. Often he paused and listened eagerly. He liked to feel that he was surrounded everywhere by little brothers, seen and unseen. With a word to Brutus, which made the dog lie down and keep perfectly

quiet, John would steal forward softly and peer through a screen of bushes, or into a tree-top, and watch the housekeeping of some shy brother beast or bird. Once he flung himself flat on the ground, and lay for a long time eagerly watching the antics of a beetle. A little later, with Brutus patiently beside him, he sat cross-legged for ten minutes, waiting to see how a certain big yellow spider would spin her web between two branches of a rose-bush.

They wandered on and on. A great golden butterfly rose before them from a bed of lilies, and together he and Brutus ran after it; not to capture and kill it, oh no! for to John the wonder of the flower with wings lay in the life which gave it power to move about and pay calls upon the other blossoms that must be always stay-at-homes. John chased it gaily, as one brother plays with another. And when it lighted on a rose-bush or a yellow broom-flower, or poised on a swaying blade of grass, he crept up and admired its lovely colors without touching the fragile thing. But at last, as if suddenly remembering an errand which it had forgotten, the butterfly soared quickly

up and away over the treetops and out of sight.

"Good-by, little brother!" called John after it. "I wish I could fly as you do and look down upon the kingdom of the forest! Then indeed I would learn all the secrets of our friends up in the treetops there, who hide their nests so selfishly. Oh, I should so love to see all the little baby birds! To be sure, some that I have seen in the ground-nests are ugly enough. Oh, the big mouths of them! Oh, the bald skins and prickly pin-feathers! Ha! ha!" John laughed so heartily that Brutus came running up to see what the joke was. "O Brutus!" cried John. "I think I know why the father and mother birds build their nests so high. They are ashamed to have any one see their funny little ones before they are quite dressed!"

Brutus looked up in John's face and seemed to smile. The boy and the dog often had talks together in this wise.

"I think I will ask them," said John. "Now, Brutus, lie still." He gave a peculiar whistle, waited a moment, and repeated it, twice, thrice. At the first call there was a flut-

tering in the branches overhead. At the second call one saw the silhouettes of tiny bodies dropping from branch to branch ever nearer to the boy below. At the third, there was a flutter, a rush of wings, and a flock of dear little birds came flying to John's shoulder, to his outstretched arms, to his head; so that presently he looked like a green bush which they had chosen for their perch.

John talked with them in his own way, with chirps and lisping of the lips, and they were no more afraid of him than of a good-natured tree. But after a while, a fly, which had been tickling Brutus's nose, grew so impertinent that the poor dog had to punish him with his paw. At the sudden movement the birds fluttered away, and John looked reproachfully at his friend. But when he saw the drop of blood on the dog's nose he forgave him.

"Poor Brutus!" he said. "You kept still as long as you could, I know. And indeed, it is time we were moving. Come, Brutus!"

The pair continued their voyage of discovery. The woods are so full of thrilling stories for those who know how to read them! A

JOHN TALKED WITH THEM

field-mouse's nest in a tuft of grass; a beehive in a hollow tree; tracks of a wild boar in the muddy edge of the brook; a beautiful lizard changing color to match the leaves and moss over which it crept. John longed to carry this little brother home to join the circle of pets. But he knew it was kinder to leave him there, where perhaps he had a home and family.

And oh, the flowers! So many kinds, so fragrant and so beautiful! John gathered a great armful to carry back to the Hermit. And so the minutes went; the shadows began to lengthen, and it was time to turn homeward.

XIV

THE WOLF-BROTHER

JOHN whistled to Brutus, to call him for the home-going. But just then he spied a new plant whose name he did not know. He was stooping over to examine the lovely pink blossoms, when Brutus came bounding up to him, behaving strangely. He whined and looked distressed; he started away into the bushes, begging John to follow. Evidently he had found something which he wished John to see. The boy laid down his armful of flowers and ran after the dog, as swiftly and softly as he could; for he did not know what forest secret he might be about to discover.

Brutus led him straight to a hollow under a great rock. And there John soon saw the cause of the dog's excitement. Stretched out on a bed of leaves were four little gray bodies. John ran up to them with a cry.

"Why, they are puppies!" he said. "Bru-

tus, you have found some little brothers of your own!"

Brutus whined and sniffed about the rock strangely. John bent over the little bodies, which lay quite still and seemed to be asleep. He touched one softly. It was stiff and cold.

"Oh, they are dead, poor little things!" said John. "I am so sorry. I hoped to take them home to my father. How came they here, I wonder? They must have starved to death!"

Just then John saw one of the puppies give a tiny shiver. Its legs moved feebly and its eyes opened. "Ah! One of them still lives!" he cried eagerly. "Perhaps I can save its life, the dear little thing!"

He took the gray body up in his arms and hugged it tenderly, but it made no response. Then, laying it down again on the leaves, he drew from his basket a crust of bread which he had brought to nibble while he walked. (It is such fun to have something to nibble when one goes for a ramble in the woods!) John ran to the brook which babbled close by, and, dipping the bread in the water until it was soft,

returned to put some in the mouth of the little gray thing that lay so pitifully on the leaves.

"Eat, little brother!" said John.

Brutus looked on gravely. The puppy opened its mouth feebly and swallowed a bit of bread. After the first taste it grew eager, and began to nibble hungrily. John gave it all he had, and was overjoyed to see it gradually gain strength. But still it could not stand on its weak little legs.

"We must take him home, Brutus," said John. "We will make him well and strong, then we shall have another little dog to be your baby brother."

Brutus said nothing, though perhaps he knew better. Presently he was trotting homeward; tracing backward, as no human being could have done, the winding way by which they had come through the dense forest. Behind him came John, carrying the little gray creature tenderly in his arms, and with the basket full of flowers on his back. And so at last they reached the hut, in the door of which stood the Hermit, shading his eyes and looking anxiously for them.

"My son!" he cried gladly when they appeared. "You were gone so long that I feared you were lost, even with Brutus to guide you. It is after sundown. Where have you been, and what do you bring there?"

"We have been — I know not where," said John; "farther than I have gone since I came to the forest. It must be near the homes of men. For see! We have found a little dog! His brothers were lying dead beside him; I think they were starved to death. But this one lives, and some day I hope he will grow into a big dog like Brutus, — though indeed he does not look much like him now!"

So John prattled eagerly, laying the little creature in the old man's arms. But the Hermit looked at it and looked again. Then he smiled at John.

"Ah, Son!" he said. "This will never be a dog like Brutus. You have brought home a baby wolf!"

"A wolf!" cried John. "He looks quite like a puppy, and he is gentle, too!"

"They are much alike," said the Hermit. "You saved this poor little cub in good time,

John. He is very weak. Probably his mother was killed by some hunters, who left her little ones there to starve. That is what they do, John, never stopping to think what suffering they cause. But let us now feed this little fellow with warm milk, and we shall soon have him as gay as ever. I am glad that you brought him, John. We needed a wolf-brother in our kingdom."

"But, Father! a wolf!" cried John, with a shudder. He had not forgotten the horror of his first night alone in the forest, and the long howl which had made him lose his senses. "Oh, will he not grow big and eat us up, my father? Yes; that was why Brutus acted so strangely. He knew it was no puppy, although I told him so."

"It is quite safe to keep him, John," said the Hermit. "We cannot turn him out to starve, for he is too young to care for himself. You will see to-morrow that he will play like any puppy. Brutus and he will be great friends,—they are relatives already. Once upon a time Brutus had a wolf for his ancestor. And as we ourselves know not from whom we may be

descended, so must we treat all creatures as our brothers. Yes, this wolfkin will grow up lean and ugly-looking, like any wolf. But we will teach him to be kind and gentle, John, even as Brutus is."

And the Hermit was right. The wolf-cub soon became the pet and plaything of the animal kingdom. With food and care he grew into a round, roly-poly ball of fur. He played merrily with Brutus and the kittens. And though at first he was a bit rough, they and John taught him better ways, so that he kicked and bit his friends no longer.

As the months went by, they watched him change gradually from cub to wolf. They were sorry to see him lose his puppy looks and frisky manners. But what could they do? It is a great pity, but no one has yet discovered how to make babies of any sort remain babies. Gradually he lost his roundness. He grew longer and longer, until he was stretched out into four feet of gaunt yellowish-gray wolf. But still he remained quiet and gentle with his friends, quick to learn and ready to obey.

He was a perfectly good wolf, and he loved

John so dearly that he could scarcely be separated from him. He followed the boy wherever he went, and lay down beside him when he slept, like any watch-dog. And though he was so gentle in the animal kingdom, the Hermit knew that it would go hard with any one who should try to hurt Wolf's little master.

Yet he and Brutus were the best of friends. The good dog was too noble to be jealous.

XV

THE GREEN STRANGER

FOR five happy years John lived with the good Hermit, and became a sturdy lad of fourteen before anything new happened of great moment to the animal kingdom. In all this time he had seen no human creature except the Hermit himself. Their hut was so far in the forest that no travelers ever passed that way.

But John was never lonely, for he had the kindest of fathers in the Hermit, and the happiest of comrades and playmates in the circle of pets, ever increasing, who gathered about the abode of peace. Brutus was still his dearest friend. But the wolf was almost as intimate. As for Bruin, he was never a constant dweller with the colony, but came and went at will. Sometimes he disappeared for weeks at a time, and they knew that he was wandering through the forest which stretched for miles in every direction, pathless and uninhabited. And some-

times they wondered what adventures the big brother might be enjoying.

"If only he could tell me!" wished John. But this kind of gossip was still impossible between them.

One day John was out in the forest, not far from the Hermit's hut, cutting wood for the winter, which was near at hand. He was alone, for a wonder. The wolf had come with him, but had now trotted away into the forest on business of his own. The bear had disappeared some weeks before, on one of his pilgrimages. Brutus was at that moment with the Hermit in the hut; for the dog divided his attentions between the young friend and the old.

John had lifted his axe to attack a certain tree when, with a scurry of little feet, a frightened hare came bounding past him, ears laid back and eyes bulging with fear. It was so strange to see a startled creature in this peaceful wood, that John dropped his axe wonderingly. Then he noted that the birds were chattering nervously overhead, and his quick ear caught furtive rustlings in the underbrush all around him. The forest was alive with fears.

Presently the wolf came bounding past, with wild eyes, evidently making for the hut. John called, but the frightened creature did not pause.

Very soon John heard over his shoulder an unusual sound. He turned quickly, and saw a sight which made his heart rise in his throat.

Across an open glade in the wood his friend the bear was lumbering on all fours, wild-eyed, with lolling tongue and panting breath. Close behind him came on foot a young man, several years older than John, dressed in a suit of green velvet, with a plumed cap. In his hand he bore a long spear, and he was charging upon the bear with a cruel light in his eyes. Suddenly Bruin made for a tree, and began to climb, clutching the bark frantically with his claws. At sight of his prey about to escape, the stranger gave a loud, fierce cry and dashed forward, at the same time drawing from behind his shoulder a bow such as men used in hunting. He fitted an arrow to the string, and was about to shoot, when John sprang forward with blazing eyes.

"You shall not shoot!" he cried. "This is

a peaceful wood. You shall not kill my friend the bear."

At this unexpected happening, the young man turned with a start and a snarl, like a dog from whom one would take away his bone.

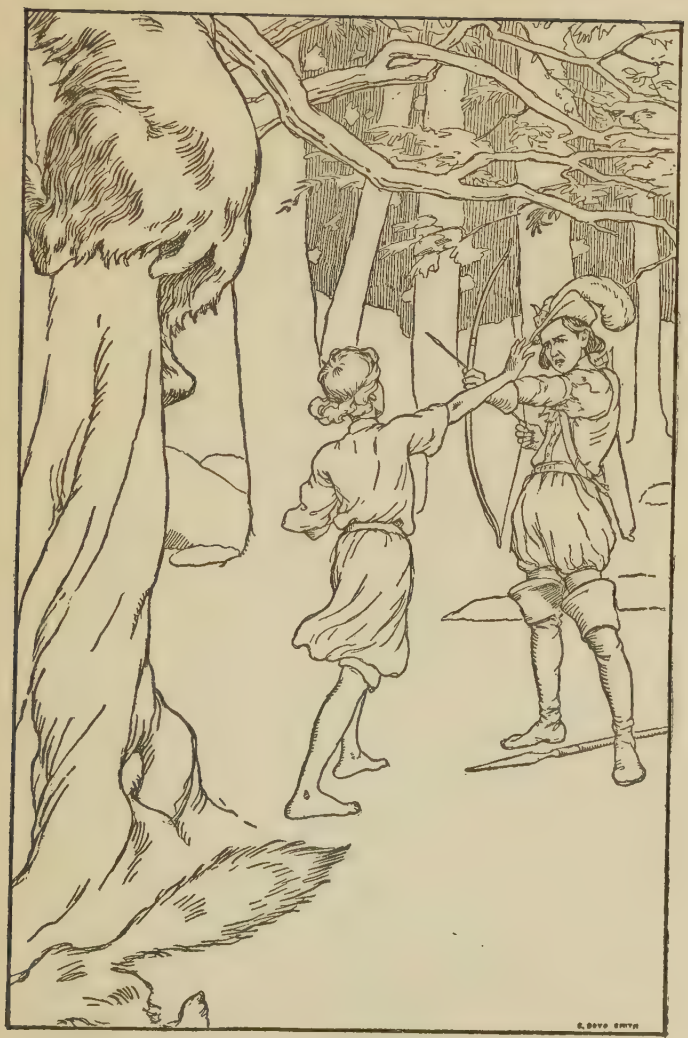
"Who are you?" he cried angrily. "How dare you interrupt my sport! Do you know who I am?"

"I do not care who you are!" answered John. "You shall not hunt in these woods. You must go away."

"Go away!"

The face of the stranger was white with rage. He turned from the tree in which the bear had now found a place of safety behind a crotch, and pointed his arrow at John. The lad saw his danger. Even as the stranger drew the arrow to its head John leaped forward; before the other knew what was happening, John seized him in his arms and with a mighty effort wrenched away the weapon. It was wonderful how easily he mastered this fellow, who was some inches taller than himself.

Beside himself with rage, the stranger grappled with John, and then began a wrestling



YOU SHALL NOT KILL MY FRIEND THE BEAR

match strange to see. If the bear up in the tree knew what it all meant, he must have been very much excited.

The two lads clinched, swayed, and finally fell to the ground, rolling over and over. The stranger pummeled and kicked, scratched and bit. John merely defended himself, holding his enemy firmly and trying to keep him under. It was easy to see that he was the stronger of the two. Presently the young man began to weaken, and at last John felt the stranger's body grow limp in his clutch. He felt a thrill of triumph such as the Hermit certainly had never taught him. But suddenly, remembering the duty of a noble foe, he rose to his feet, leaving the stranger lying where he was.

He was not badly hurt. Presently he also rose, sullenly, and pulled on his cap which had fallen off. John had taken possession of his spear and bow. He now gravely handed an arrow to the young man.

"You may keep that," he said politely. "I think you can do no harm with that."

The stranger turned crimson, and his face was wicked to see.

"You shall pay for this!" he spluttered, with sobs in his voice. "No one can injure me without danger. You shall—"

At this moment, not far away in the direction of the Hermit's hut, a horn sounded. Once, twice, thrice, it blew vigorously, as if giving a command. Both John and the stranger started.

"I must go!" muttered the latter to himself. "Needs must at that call." And without another word or glance at John, he ran to his horse, which was tethered close by, and was soon galloping away in the direction of the bugle-call.

Trembling with excitement and with alarm at this coming of strangers to the forest which so long had been at peace, John hurried back to the hut. But Bruin remained safe in his tree.

He seemed to have no wish to come down and learn what all these strange doings meant.

XVI

THE HUNT

JOHN found the Hermit sitting as usual beside the door of his hut, reading his book. He was surrounded by his family of pets. Brutus bounded to meet John, but the boy was too excited to give him the usual caress.

"Father!" he cried, "have you heard or seen nothing? There are strangers in the forest, wicked strangers who hunt our friends the beasts. I have but now come from such a terrible scene!"

He covered his face with his hands. The Hermit started to his feet.

"What has happened?" he quavered. "Just now the wolf came leaping into the hut; but I feared nothing. Your clothes are torn. Your face is bloody. Who has been hurting you, my son?"

But before John could answer came again the call of a bugle, this time very near. "*Tara! Tara! Tara!*"

"Huntsmen!" cried the Hermit. "Send Brutus into the hut." John drove the dog inside, and some of the house-pets with him. Already the others had taken alarm at the threatening noise and were scattering in every direction.

Nearer and nearer came the sound of galloping hoofs, the baying of hounds, the shouts of many men. John and the Hermit stood with pale faces, waiting.

Suddenly into the clearing bounded a frightened deer, — a slender dappled creature with brown eyes. Straight to the Hermit she ran, and dropped panting at his feet.

"It is our doe!" cried John, his face turning whiter. "O father! They are hunting her!"

The old man said nothing, but stooped and threw his mantle over the trembling creature. Hardly had he done so when the hounds burst into the clearing, barking fiercely, rushing to- ards the spot where the deer lay.

The Hermit raised his staff and stepped forward with a quick word. Instantly the dogs paused, cringing. They snarled and snapped

their teeth, but made no motion to draw nearer. There was another loud bugle-blast, and a group of horsemen burst into the open space.

"Hola! Hola! The stand!" cried the foremost rider, flourishing his sword. The others clustered about this leader. He was a tall, oldish man, red-faced and fierce-eyed. Like the stranger whom John had met, he was magnificently dressed in green velvet, with a gold chain about his neck, and a star blazing on his breast. He wore also a green cap bound with a gold band, from which a golden feather drooped to his shoulder. The gloves which he wore, the baldric of his bugle, and the hilt of the sword which he brandished aloft, glittered with jewels.

When he spied the Hermit standing with upraised staff over the deer, while the dogs cowered at his feet, he drew up his horse and gave a shout of wonder. Then once more there was a moment of intense silence in that spot whose quiet had been broken by such a din. Thereafter the splendid leader of the hunt spoke in a brutal voice.

"Ho! Who are you who interrupt our hunt and stand between us and our quarry? Stand aside, old man, whoever you are. This is no place for you. The deer is ours." He flourished his jeweled sword eagerly.

"I shall not stand aside," said the Hermit. "This doe is mine, my friend and companion. Her milk has nourished me many a day, and she shall not die in this place which is my home."

"Shall not die?" cried the huntsman hoarsely. "Do you know to whom you speak?"

"I can guess," said the Hermit quietly. "From his cruelty and his free speech I judge it must be he who calls himself king of the realm beyond this forest."

"King of this forest and lord of all that dwell therein," shouted the huntsman ferociously. "And who are you who dare oppose me?"

"I am a hermit," said the old man simply. "My service is to God, whom you dishonor. My friends are the creatures whom you hunt. My study is to save life, which you would

destroy. Depart, and leave in peace this place where life is sacred."

"Depart!" roared the King, while his nobles crowded around him, murmuring and bending threatening looks upon the Hermit and the lad. "Not till yonder animal is slain. Ho, have at her!"

With prick of spur he urged his horse forward. But quick as thought the Hermit with his staff drew a circle around himself and John and the doe, which still lay panting at his feet, wrapped in the gray mantle.

"Dare not to cross this line!" he cried. "This ground is holy. Years ago in the Father's name I consecrated it. 'T is holy as any cathedral, and 't is sanctuary for man and beast. Hear what the Lord says to you: 'They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain.'"

The Hermit raised his hand and spoke a word to the horses that were being urged forward. With a shrill whinny they rose on their hind legs, pawing the air, and refused to advance.

"What witchcraft is this!" cried the King, spurring his steed cruelly. But the animal, like

the dogs, obeyed the Hermit's will rather than the King's.

"No witchcraft," said the Hermit, still guarding the deer with his upraised staff. "It is the Lord's will. You, who have ever disobeyed His holy word, perhaps know not how dear to Him were the birds and beasts, His first companions, His childhood friends. And to this day, for He Himself hath said it, not a sparrow falleth without His knowledge and pity. O wicked man! How then can you delight to kill?"

The King gazed at the Hermit like one in a dream. "How dare you say such things to me, your King?" he said at last.

"You are no king of mine, thank God!" said the Hermit. "I am an exile. I am of no land. This forest is my domain, my animal kingdom. Depart, I beg, without more bloodshed. O King, already in time past the hunt has cost you dear. Will you not take heed lest the Lord punish you further for your sins?"

The King turned pale. "This is certainly witchcraft!" he muttered. "What know you of the past?" he cried, almost as if against his will.

"I know much," said the Hermit calmly. "I know that hunting cost the life of your eldest son. Will you not heed that warning, lest more ill befall?"

There was a stir among the nobles, and John saw the young man with whom he had wrestled a short time before spur his horse forward to the King's side. His face was black and angry.

"Sire — father," he said. "Will you not end this parley and slay them all? I would have a hand in it for the sake of that young cub there!" and he shook his fist toward John. But more he did not say; perhaps he was ashamed to tell how the wood-boy had got the best of him.

"Ay," said the Hermit, pointing a finger at him and shaking it sadly. "The second son follows in the footsteps of his brother, and like his father is cruel, bloodthirsty, revengeful. Beware, O King! Beware, King's son! For happiness was never yet distilled from innocent blood, nor life from death."

The King shuddered, as all could see. "I hunt," he said, — and it was strange to see how he was almost apologetic, — "I hunt all ani-

mals mercilessly, because through them the Prince my son was slain. I will hunt them out of my kingdom, until not one remains. I will slay them until the ground is soaked with their blood! Not an animal, save such as are of use, shall exist in all my land. I will have no pets — no singing birds. I hate them all!"

"Ay," said the Hermit, shaking his head sadly, "you hate them all! But I love them all. And here they come to me. 'The sparrow hath found a house and the swallow a nest where she may lay her young.' I will protect them with my life. You dare not kill me, O King! Godless though you are, once you were a Christian, and you know the meaning of the words I spoke when I said that this was holy ground."

He drew from his bosom the iron Cross which he wore, and held it up before the King.

The monarch shrank back and seemed to hesitate. Suddenly he wheeled his horse and blew a blast upon his bugle. "Back!" he cried somewhat bitterly. "We will not linger here for a paltry doe. Let us leave this cursed wood and this crusty hermit. Back to our own

demesne, where we shall find sport enough, I dare say."

Once more he blew his horn and bounded forward out of the clearing; the nobles after him, and the cowed, disappointed dogs trailing at the rear with tails between their legs. John could not help feeling sorry for them. Poor things! They at least knew no better.

John was just stooping to pet the frightened deer, when an arrow whizzed over his shoulder and struck the creature in the haunch. The poor animal gave a cry of pain, and blood dyed the gray mantle of the Hermit, the first blood shed in that place of peace.

With a shout of anger John leaped up and looked over his shoulder. A familiar wicked face grinned back at him, as a horse and rider galloped into the forest. The King's son had skulked behind to shoot that shaft.

"My son!" cried the Hermit, laying trembling hands on John's shoulder. "It was meant for you. You would have died had you not stooped at that moment to caress the doe."

"Poor doe!" said John, kneeling beside her and busying himself with the arrow. "You

have saved my life. Now we must save yours. My father, I think she is not badly hurt."

And he began to stanch the blood and bind up the wound with the skill which the Hermit had taught him.

But the old man stood for a long time gazing into the forest after the party of huntsmen. "A murderer and a coward," he said. "In sanctuary he has shed innocent blood. For many evil deeds the price will surely be paid. And the price is heavy."

XVII

THE MESSENGER

THE little deer was not greatly hurt by the cowardly hunter. John and the Hermit nursed her tenderly, and so great was their knowledge of healing balms that she was soon nibbling the grass about their dooryard, as sprightly as ever, save for a slight lameness in one leg.

Bruin was with them once more, a constant guest in the little circle. The fright of that day when the hunters came to the forest had affected all the animals, who clung closely to their two human friends, and did not venture far from the hut.

Although John and the Hermit had never spoken together of the King since that terrible day, the boy thought often about him, and about the young Prince with whom he had wrestled for the life of the bear. And John was troubled by many things. He thought how great must be the suffering among the helpless

animals when men so cruel were in power. If animals were treated so, how must the poor and lowly people fare at the hands of their lords and masters? Were the mighty so cruel to one another, — to children and women and aged people? All these were weak and helpless, too. John remembered the Hermit's tales of war and the wickedness of cities, and his heart grew sick. What a terrible world this was to live in, if the great and powerful were so bad!

But when John was most unhappy, longing to change it all, he would look around the little hut where, surrounded by his animal friends, the dear old Hermit sat under the wooden Cross, reading out of the great book. Then John grew happy once more. For the Hermit had taught him well from that holy volume.

"It will all come right some time," he said to himself. "Some day the Lord will teach men better, and all will be peace and love as it is here. But oh! If only I were big and strong and powerful, so that I could help to hasten that happy day!"

One evening, several weeks later, they sat as usual in the midst of their circle of pets. The

Hermit, with the raven on his shoulder and the cat on his knee, was reading from the book. John, on a bench by the window, was using the last light of an autumn day to make a basket for gathering herbs. The gaunt wolf lay at his feet. Beside him rested the bear, snuffling in his sleep; and stretched out between him and the Hermit, Brutus snored peacefully. On John's shoulders roosted their carrier pigeon, and several kittens played about his legs. The deer lay on a pallet in the corner. It was a very peaceful scene, and every one seemed to have forgotten the fright of a month before.

Suddenly John said: "Father, tell me about the King."

The old man started, and placing a finger in the book to mark the place, looked at John with surprise. "Why should we speak of him?" he asked uneasily. "This is the hour of peace and meditation on pleasant things."

"I have thought about him so much," said John. "I cannot tell why, but I am unable to forget him. I want to know more of him and of his son."

The old man shook his head. "I am sorry,"

he said. "Did you care so much for his gorgeous clothes and jewels, his horse and band of followers? Have they turned your head, foolish boy? Did you find anything to admire in their talk and manner and looks? I am disappointed, John!"

"Nay, I did not admire anything about them," John hastened to say. "I saw that the King was cruel. I believe well that he was also wicked. But he seemed to have friends. How can a bad man have friends? And why do the people allow him to be their king?"

"Ah, John!" cried the Hermit, "it is not so easy to find a good king! Perhaps his people do not care; perhaps they know no better. Perhaps he is so powerful that they have no choice but to obey him."

"Is the King so wicked?" asked John, wondering how the Hermit knew so much. "What has he done that is bad?"

The old man hesitated; then he turned to John with a gesture that the boy did not understand.

"Listen, John," he said. "I will tell you some things that this King has done. It is well

that you should know. Years ago, before you were born, he was not the lawful king in this country. The true king was his brother Cyril, who was good and kind, ruling wisely and well. But suddenly he died. Those in his service guessed that his brother Robert, this present King, had caused his death by poison. So Robert became king. A stormy time he had of it, at first; for the whole land loved King Cyril. Many accused Robert, and refused to do him honor,—especially one holy man, John, King Cyril's friend and physician. Yes, my son, he bore the same blessed name as yourself. This man the people loved dearly, for he was wise and generous with his wisdom. He healed them freely of their hurts. He went about the country doing good, bringing love and good cheer wherever he went. He was honored almost as a saint. But because he dared lift his voice against the King—he died. No one knew how it happened. At the same time his little son disappeared; men believed that he also was slain by the cruel King. The people were furious; they stormed and threatened. But alas! gradually the voices of their leaders

were silenced. Some died suddenly, as John had done. Some disappeared. Some were banished from the kingdom. Some went away, broken-hearted; who knows where they may be now?"

"Oh, how could the people forget their King and the holy man who had been good to them?" cried John. "How could they allow that bad man to be their king?"

"The people?" said the Hermit sadly. "The people so soon forget! Do you not recall how, ages ago, the people treated the best Man who ever lived? These folk dared not seem to remember. They were selfish and lazy. The new King was rich and powerful. They found it easier to grumble and do nothing else. And when the King said, 'Hunt!' they hunted. When he commanded, 'Hate all animals; have no pets!' they obeyed him. But it is a gloomy land, a sad land, of which Robert is king!"

"Oh!" said John, "how do you know so much, my father?"

"Do not ask," said the Hermit. "One day I will tell you, but not now."

"Oh, he is a wicked King, who ought to

die!" burst out John, throwing up his arm angrily. "Would I were a man, and I would go kill him. But I will do it when I am grown!"

At his rough tones and gestures the birds fluttered away, frightened, and the animals slunk into the corners, trembling. The peace of the little hut was rudely disturbed.

"Nay, my son, nay!" cried the old man in horror. "Say not such wicked words! See how you frighten our peaceful friends. What have I tried to teach you? It is not yours to avenge. The Lord himself will punish as he sees best. Perhaps even now he chastens that wicked heart. Already the King has lost his dearest, oldest son. He was killed five years ago while hunting a wild boar in the forest. But now —"

At this moment there was a loud knock on the door of the hut. The Hermit and John started and looked at each other in wonder. When had such a thing happened before! Brutus and the wolf arose, bristling. The bear growled savagely. The raven gave a screech of fear and burrowed under John's cot. There

was a moment's pause. Then the Hermit, crossing himself, called loudly, —

"Enter, if your errand be peace. Enter, in the name of the Lord."

Quickly the latch clicked and the door flew open. Into the midst of the startled group stumbled a man, breathless and covered with dust from head to foot. His hat was gone. His hair was disheveled, and his eyes bloodshot.

"Hasten!" he cried, turning to the Hermit. "You are the man I seek, — you, skilled in herbs and healing. The King sends for you."

"The King!" The Hermit and John spoke the word together, staring wildly.

"Yes, the King," repeated the man. "I have killed my horse to get here. He fell in the forest yonder, even as I spied the light from your window. There is no time to be lost. We must go on foot to the nearest town, where horses may be had. Hasten, old man, and bring your herbs and balsams."

"But whither? And for what purpose?" asked the Hermit, still standing with one trembling hand on the holy book.

THE KING SENDS FOR YOU

"The King's son is wounded," cried the messenger. "Five days ago he was hunting the deer, and an arrow, glancing falsely, pierced his breast. He was grievously hurt. Even now he may be dying. Why do we waste words? The physicians have done their best, but they have given him up at last. The King raved; he was beyond reason. Suddenly, in his madness he spoke of you, the wizard of this forest. He recalled that day when you cursed him for the sake of your brute creatures. He vowed it was all enchantment. 'Send for the wizard!' he cried. 'Let him cure my son. He dare not refuse, for he claims to be a servant of God.'"

The Hermit was trembling now with emotion. "It is the Lord's will!" he said. "He was wounded while hunting an innocent beast. On the strength and speed of another beast hung his chance for life. And now, only with the aid of another can we reach him in time. — Nay, upon a fourth we must rely to find our way out of the forest. Brutus only can help us. But let us hasten. Come, my friend! Back to the city once more." Calling to the dog, he began to make hurried preparations for departure.

John ran to him. "Do not go to the wicked man!" he whispered. "They may kill you. Oh, what should I do then?"

The Hermit shook his head. "I must go," he said. "It is written, 'Do good to them that hate you.' There is no question of my duty."

"Oh, let me then go with you, father," pleaded John.

The Hermit laid his hand on the boy's head, and looked at him tenderly. "The time is not yet ripe, my son," he said. "Who knows what all this may mean? Wait a little longer. Stay and care for our little friends. From the nearest village I will send Brutus back to you. You will not be lonely, with your work and play as usual. Do not neglect either. Adieu, my dear son!" And he blessed John.

Embracing the boy and bidding farewell to the other friends, the Hermit took his staff and bag of simples, and wrapped his cloak about him. "I trust you, John," he said at the door. "Be patient, obedient, and wise." Then in the folds of his cloak he took the carrier pigeon. "I will send you word by our friend, if need be," he said, as he went out into the darkness.

Brutus and the messenger followed him closely. The door banged behind them, and John was alone with the circle of frightened, cowering creatures. He threw himself on his knees before the Hermit's table, and laying his head on the book, began to weep, he scarcely knew why.

XVIII

THE CARRIER PIGEON

AT evening of the next day, just as John had finished his simple supper, he heard a scratching at the door. It was Brutus, returning footsore and weary. Tied to his collar John found a message from the Hermit.

"Be of good cheer," it read. "We mount excellent steeds to ride to the King. If by God's help I may save the young man's life, I will return to you speedily thereafter. If it be the Lord's will that other things befall, I will send the carrier pigeon with news. Bear a good heart, my son. Keep to your studies, your exercise, and your devotions as if I were with you. So when I return I shall find you a little stronger, wiser, a better champion of the good. Farewell!"

John read this letter eagerly, and set himself to obey the master's wishes. But now the days seemed long indeed. In spite of the many

friends who shared the hut with him, John felt very lonely, and longed for the dear old man's return. But now he had something more to think of: the good King Cyril and the holy man, his friend, who had borne the name of John. And he longed to be some day a man like that.

The Hermit had been gone for nearly a week. One day John was sitting by the door of the hut, busy with his studies, when he heard a *whir* in the air overhead. Glancing up, he saw the flash of snowy wings, and presently the carrier pigeon came fluttering down to his shoulder.

"Ah, my dear bird!" cried John, tenderly taking the creature in his hands and lifting it to peck at his lips as it always loved to do. "You have come to me safely from far away. You have come from the place where my dear father is. Have you brought me word from him?"

With a soft coo the pigeon nestled closer in John's arms. Reaching under its wing, he found a scroll of writing tied there securely with a silken cord.

"A letter from my father!" he cried, untying it eagerly.

It was indeed a long letter in the good man's clear script. It told of their safe arrival, after a hard journey through the night; of their reception by the King. They had come almost too late. But when they arrived the Prince was still breathing. They were ushered into his chamber, where he lay white and still. No one could rouse him to life or consciousness. By his bedside sat the King, his face like a mountain-top wrapped in clouds.

"Save my son!" he had cried when he saw the Hermit. "Save my son, sorcerer, and I will give you whatever your heart craves."

"I am no sorcerer," the Hermit had answered. "I am God's servant, with some skill in healing, because I have studied the work of His hands and the uses of His gifts. If it be His will, I may save the young man. If otherwise, we may not hope to prevail."

"Oh, he must not die!" cried the King. "You foretold it, I remember, in the forest. But think — he is my only son. He must be king after me. He must live!"

"Other sons have died," said the Hermit solemnly. "Other princes have not lived to reign. And what of them?"

The King shuddered. "Save my son!" he repeated. "Only save this boy, and I will do whatever you ask."

"Then" (said the Hermit's letter) "I did my best. I bathed the youth's wound with my healing balsam. I gave him soothing draughts to drink. I sat by his bedside and prayed that the Lord's will might be done through me. And then came a change. A faint color blossomed in his cheeks. His lips trembled; his eyes opened and he looked at me. Then he sighed and closed his eyes. What he thought I know not. But he had paused in his march towards death. From that day he mended. The Prince's wound is now healed. The King's gratitude knew no bounds. He promised me rewards beyond belief, — which, as you know, mean naught to me.

"But, John, a strange thing has befallen. The Prince should now be well upon the road to health. He should be gaining strength every day. There seems no reason otherwise. But

such happens not. He lies passive and dazed. He seems not to care whether he lives or dies. He never speaks nor smiles, only looks sometimes at me as if he wanted to ask me something. The doctors say that he is slowly dying.

"And now, John," concluded the Hermit's letter, "now comes the reason for these long, tedious words to you. I have done my utmost, but I am powerless. Will you come? Will you try what your own skill and youth may do? It may be your mission in life to save this lad who tried to kill you. I know that if he could but once smile, he would get well. Therein lies your power. Come, as quickly as you may. Bring with you our animal friends who cannot be left behind. Brutus will lead you to the village, and thence you must find your way to the Capital. And one word more: if you find yourself in trouble or need, show the silver talisman which you wear about your neck, and I think all will be well. Remember my teachings, John, and come as soon as may be."

When John had finished the letter, he stood for a moment quite dazed. He was to leave this

place where all was peace and happiness, and go back among men whom he feared! He was to go to the very King whose name he shuddered to remember,—the King who had killed his brother and that holy man John with his little son! He was to do all this for the sake of the enemy who had hunted the bear, who had injured the gentle deer, who had aimed to take John's own life! He grew sick at the thought. Yet,—it was the Hermit himself who summoned him. And he remembered the good man's teachings.

"How I can help I know not," sighed John, "but I must go!" He laid his head upon the feathers of the carrier pigeon and shed some bitter tears. Then, placing the bird gently on the tree beside him, he straightened himself bravely. "I will go!" he said. "I will go joyfully, as one should who hopes to be worthy to bear the name of John."

Just then Brutus came sauntering from the hut, shaking himself lazily after his nap.

"Ho, Brutus!" called John, snapping his fingers. "Shall we go on a journey together, you and I? Shall we take these little friends

on a wonderful pilgrimage? And will you be my guide, as you were once before, good Brutus?"

The dog seemed to understand. He pricked up his ears, and leaped up to John's shoulders with a joyous bark. Then, rushing to the edge of the wood, he looked back, inviting John to follow.

"Oh, let us be off!" he seemed to say. "I have been longing to go to our dear master. Let us hasten, little brother!"

"Not so fast!" said John. "We have first to gather our provisions and make ready our company of pilgrims. I must take all the food I can. For I dare not trust wholly to the silver Cross. What could my father mean by that?"

Still wondering, John set about his preparations. They did not take long. There was neither lock nor bolt on the door of the Hermit's hut, nor aught of value to hide. When John's basket was packed with simple food, and the animals were gathered about him outside in the little clearing, he rolled a stone against the door, and they were ready to go.

XIX

THE JOURNEY

A STRANGE company they were, these citizens of the Animal Kingdom traveling to town! Foremost went Brutus, leading the way and feeling very important with a bundle bound upon his strong back. Gray and gaunt, the wolf trotted along at his side, like another dog. Next came John, with a knapsack on his shoulders, in which three little kittens slumbered beside the provisions for their journey; there were always new kittens in the Animal Kingdom. On his shoulder perched the raven, and by a rope he led the bear, whom he felt safer to have close by his side. Sometimes the bear trotted on all fours. Sometimes he walked upright like a big brown man, towering over John's head. Now before and now behind them went Blanche the cat, pretending as cats do that she was neither following nor leading, but traveling quite independently of them all. Frequently she dis-

appeared into the bushes or up a tree, but soon came scampering past, when she would stop to make a hasty toilet. Overhead fluttered from tree to tree the carrier pigeon and the other birds, who were John's pets and bound to follow wherever he went.

The deer and her fawn went part way with them, and the little rabbits hopped a staccato accompaniment for some time. But John did not urge them to follow. He knew they were better off in the forest, where they could take care of themselves.

All day they fared on the uneven path by which, nose to earth, Brutus led them. And at last, weary and spent, they came to the little village where the Hermit had taken horse for the longer journey.

John paused at the first house in the village and knocked at the gate. A burly fellow came to the door.

"Hello!" he cried, starting back when he saw the strange group gathered in his door-yard. "What means all this?"

"If you please," said John politely, "we go upon a journey to the King, and we seek

A STRANGE COMPANY

shelter. Will you let us sleep in your stable, friend?"

"Sleep in my stable!" muttered the man, "a beggar with a band of outlaw animals! A wolf and a bear! No, indeed. I have too much respect for the safety of my cattle and for the King's laws."

He was about to shut the door in John's face. But the lad had a sudden thought. He would try at this first place the value of the Hermit's hint.

"Stay," he said, "one moment, friend." Fumbling in his breast, he drew out the silver medal which he wore about his neck. "I was to show this —" he began.

But he saw the man start, and, shading his lantern with his hands, peer more closely at the object. Then he stared at John's face with wonder.

"In God's name!" exclaimed the man, "who are you who travel with this strange company?"

John looked almost as surprised as he. "A poor pilgrim, on the King's errand," he said. "We ask only a corner of your stable with

a bed of straw to lie on. Give us shelter, kind friend, and to-morrow speed us on our way."

The man still stared at John as though he saw a fairy. But now he threw the door wide open. "Enter," he said. "I cannot refuse you. Enter my house. You shall have a bed and supper, fair boy; but what of these?" and he turned troubled eyes upon the animals.

"Nay," said John simply, "I ask no better bed than theirs, my fellow pilgrims. Thank you for your hospitality, kind friend. May we all sleep in your stable? My animals are quite safe company. They will hurt nothing that hurts not me."

John smiled then in his happy, trustful way, and the face of the man looking into his brightened as if by reflection. His coarse mouth broadened into a smile.

"They shall sleep soundly in the hay," said he kindly, "though it be against the law. I will risk even the bear and the wolf for the sake of that you wear about your neck. But the stable and the company of beasts are not fit for the like of you. That I know, though

you be in rags. Come into the house, young stranger."

"Have you forgotten," said John gently, "how once a stable sheltered the greatest King of all among the humblest beasts? I have often had worse beds than a pile of sweet straw. I shall be happy enough among my friends."

The man hung his head for a moment, then raised it and looked at John strangely.

"I *had* forgotten," he said. "Who are you? Who are you who talk so wisely, and who wear that silver Cross upon you?"

"I am John, the Hermit's pupil, and I am very tired," was the answer. "May we not rest now? To-morrow perhaps we will show you some pretty tricks to pay for our night's lodging."

"*John*," mused the man, "that is a good name! I want no pay from any one who bears that name." And still eyeing John strangely, he led the way to the stable door.

He bade them good-night; and there upon the straw the two-footed and four-footed pilgrims rested peacefully together, nestled in a

warm mass of fur and feathers, flaxen hair, and woolen rags.

In the morning the farmer brought them food, and his family came with him to see the strange visitors. For so many animals had never before been seen together in that country. John put Bruin and Brutus through their tricks, and the children clapped their hands joyously at the sight. Then John himself tumbled and danced for them, and they were in an ecstasy.

At the end of the performance they clung about the boy's neck and flung themselves upon the animals, declaring that they must not go away, and begging them to stay forever.

But John shook his head, smiling. "I must be off," he said. "I must do the King's errand."

And so they went upon their way, the children watching them wistfully out of sight. But the farmer went with them some little distance to point out the road; and when he left them he spoke a last word of warning.

"The King has no love of animals," he said. "There are none in all the kingdom save those for use and those he hunts to kill. There are

no pets nor playmates for the children; no birds even in his forests. Beware his wrath, my lad, when he has word of your caravan."

"I am going to the King," said John simply. "We go to save the life of his son."

The farmer stared again at John with a strange expression. "You, to save his life!" he muttered. "I cannot understand it all!" And he passed his hand over his forehead.

"I have some skill at healing. Farewell!" cried John gaily. "We shall be safe, I know."

"Ay, with that silver thing on your neck," said the man to himself, shading his eyes to watch them out of sight. "John; the Hermit's pupil; a boy with the knowledge of healing, and a smile,—Saint Francis! What a smile! He is like our holy John come back again as a child. Who can he be?" And he crossed himself devoutly as he went back to his work.

But John and his friends went sturdily upon their way. Up and down hills they traveled; along dusty roads; through lonely stretches of moor and plain. They caused great excitement in the villages through which they

passed. It was years since the townsfolk had seen a dancing bear; years even since they had enjoyed the frolics of a cat and kittens. The raven was a source of delight. The birds that followed overhead and came at John's call, perching on his arms and shoulders, filled the children with envy. The wolf looked so fierce that they were afraid of him; but his brother Brutus was petted in a way to spoil any ordinary dog. Yet he kept his temper and his poise, and endured their homage meekly.

Often, in the country through which they passed, John found sick persons to whom he could bring relief, and gladly he used the knowledge which the Hermit had taught him. It seemed that there were few in that land who had the skill of healing, and many of the sick had long suffered for lack of the simple remedies which John had often used for his pets. He saved several lives. Oh! that was joy for John! The people were very grateful, and would have paid him anything he wished. But all he asked was food or shelter for himself and his friends. Then they spoke his name softly and kissed his hands, which made John laugh.

John found it easy enough to earn all the food he needed in the villages. Remembering his mountebank days, he had but to hold a little performance in the public square. Every one would hurry to see Bruin do his tricks and John himself turn somersaults and walk on his hands; after which the bear would dance and pass the hat, into which the pennies rained generously.

But it was harder to find lodgings for the night. Knowing the King's hatred for animals, men feared to shelter this caravan. Only when John would pull from his breast the talisman of silver would they soften and yield to his wishes, wondering and almost worshiping, as the farmer had done on that first day. John himself was the most wondering of them all. For he saw no reason why the silver Cross should have such power. Sometimes he wondered if it was bewitched; but he knew the good Hermit would not have bade him rely on magic. Yet it made him almost afraid, so that he used this power only when he had to for the sake of the weary animals. He himself was welcome everywhere, — perhaps for the

sake of his yellow hair and blue eyes, which were a wonder in that country; but more likely for the smiling ways and cheerful speech of him, that made his passing through that gloomy land like the passage of a sunbeam through thick clouds; and blessings followed after him.

And so, after six days of travel, they came at last to the King's city.

XX

THE ARRIVAL

ABOUT sundown John with his train came to the gates of the city where the King lived. They were all very hungry, dusty, and tired.

A watchman on the wall, with telescope to his eye, had spied them afar off.

"Hello!" he cried. "What is this coming down the highroad? It seems a small caravan, creeping and writhing like a caterpillar. The head of it seems human. But, by my faith! the rest of it is like nothing I have seen for many years! What ho! Let us be on guard. It may be an enemy of the King."

The warders ran to arms. And so it happened that a crowd of them were gaping at the entrance when John and his companions came up.

The lad was almost exhausted. But when he saw the way barred by a band of frowning

armed men, he doffed his cap and smiled his own peculiar smile.

"Good-evening, friends," he said. "We have been long in reaching your city. We are glad to be at the gates at last."

"Who are you?" asked the Captain gruffly, stepping forward and barring the way, while his companions gazed in amazement at the wolf and the bear who were huddled at John's side.

"I come on an errand to the King," said John. "Please guide me to him quickly, for it is an urgent matter."

"To the King!" sneered the Captain; and the warders echoed his laugh. "No one goes to the King in such company as you bring. You must know that. They are outlaws, all,— and you too, I dare say!"

"I know not. But I must see the King, and that quickly," said John. "I come with these friends to heal the King's son, if I can."

"Ha! More sorcery!" interrupted the Captain. "No, you shall not enter here. The King allows no animals in his domain. How you have brought them so far I cannot guess!"

"Well, I bear this," said John, drawing out the silver talisman.

The men bent forward to look at it, then fell back, staring at one another with astonished faces.

"Who is he?" they whispered among themselves. "What shall we do?"

"Let me pass, good friends," begged John, looking up in their faces with his simple smile. "I will promise to do no harm. Among friends my friends are quite harmless. But tell me, I pray you, where I may find the good Hermit who healed the Prince's wound? I come at his bidding."

At these words the guards pulled themselves together and exchanged looks. They began to swagger.

"Ah, is it so?" growled the Captain. "You are a friend of the wizard himself. We must let the King know of this. Yes, you shall enter. Here! Take him captive! Off with him to the prison."

"To prison!" cried John in amazement. "For what ill deed, I pray?"

But already the guards were pressing for-

ward upon him. At the sight of their threatening looks Brutus ran in front of John and began to growl warningly, crouching ready to spring upon the first who should lay hands on the boy. The wolf bristled and showed his fangs. And the bear, rising on his hind legs, growled and blinked his little red eyes so terribly that the men fell back. John was protected by powerful friends. The other animals shrank close to him, and the raven began to scream.

"Have a care!" warned John. "My friends are armed with sharp teeth and claws, and they will not readily let a stranger touch me."

"He is a wizard!" muttered the soldiers; but they shrank back, afraid to touch him.

"Why do you treat me thus?" asked John wistfully.

"Because you say you are a friend to that vile magician of the woods, by whose arts the Prince was wounded, they say, and who yet holds him at death's door." So spoke the Captain of the guards. "The Prince still lives. But when he passes, the King has decreed that the wizard shall die the death. You come in time to share it, if you be his pupil!"

JOHN WAS PROTECTED BY POWERFUL FRIENDS

"Oh, hasten, hasten!" cried John, clasping his hands. "Please take me to him! Perhaps I may yet save the good old man. If it is not too late, perhaps I can also save the Prince."

"Ay, we will take you to him fast enough, if you will call off your growling beasts," said the Captain.

"Nay, we must all go together," answered John, who saw how they meant to trap him. "Oh, come, let us be moving, for there is no time to lose!"

Grumbling, but afraid either to delay or to venture near John, the guards formed in a hollow square about him and his pets, and they all began to march in a strange company through the city streets to the palace.

A crowd gathered as they passed. Men, women, and children craned their necks to look at this group of animals, such as had not been seen in the city for years. They gazed, too, at the handsome yellow-haired boy, and whispered among themselves, "Who is he? What has he done?"

John noticed that the faces of the people who gazed at him were set and hard. They

seemed sad and hopeless. He pitied them. "It is a kingdom without love," he said to himself.

Yet, as they looked, their faces changed. A new something came into their eyes. A whispering went around among the crowd, increasing to a murmur, like the sound of bees.

They came at last to the palace, where the crowd was forced to pause. But, surrounded by the band of soldiers, John and his party went in and on, led by the Captain himself, at whose word or gesture doors flew open and servants bowed.

Through long, glittering halls, lined with mirrors in which their rags and dust, draggled feathers and matted hair showed pitifully, limped John and his weary friends. Up a grand marble staircase, with wondering footmen lining either side, pattered on muddy feet Brutus and his gray brother, and the bear, clumsily erect at John's side. Behind mewed the tired Blanche, whose kittens John carried in his arms, while the carrier pigeon and the raven perched on his shoulder. But the other birds had remained outside in the trees of the palace garden.

XXI

THE PALACE

AT last they came to a great hall, full of people who seemed met for some solemn purpose. At the door stood the Grand Chamberlain in lace and velvet, holding in one hand his staff, and in the other an hourglass at which he was gazing earnestly.

"What is this?" he said sternly, as the Captain approached with his prisoners. "Do you not know that this is a moment of life and death?"

In a few whispered words the Captain explained matters.

The Chamberlain stared sullenly at John. "No more wizardry!" he said at last. "We have had enough of that. The King has just passed judgment on the sorcerer. In five minutes he is to die. The doctors declare this to be the only hope for the Prince's life."

"Oh, let me see him! Let me see my good

father!" begged John, clasping his hands piteously. "I may yet save his life, I and these friends."

As he said this, John had a sudden thought. He fumbled in his bosom for the silver Cross, and held it out with trembling hands so that the Chamberlain could see it.

The man started back, turning pale and letting fall his staff of office. "What does this mean?" he cried. "Who is this lad? How came he by this token?"

Once more the Captain whispered to him. The Chamberlain looked wildly at John, then at the hourglass, in which the last grains of sand had sifted down.

"The time has come," he said; "the fatal moment is here! I should give the signal for which the executioners wait. But something holds me back. In Heaven's name, what does it all mean? Is it sorcery or—"

"It is the Lord's will," said John quietly. "Oh, pray, let me see the King."

"I do not understand," muttered the Chamberlain hoarsely. "But, in the name of the talisman which you wear, enter. Go alone. I

dare not face the King with his order disobeyed."

A broad aisle was left open down the hall through the ranks of lords and ladies. At the end of it was a tall gilt throne. And on the throne, clad in purple and gold, John saw a figure sitting, pale and terrible. It was the King. John knew his cold, cruel face, although the man had greatly altered in those weeks since the day of hunting in the park. For now the King's hair was snow-white and his body was bent like that of an old man.

John fixed his eyes upon this figure and began to walk forward steadily. Beside him paced Brutus, looking up anxiously into the boy's face. In his right hand John led the bear, walking upright. The wolf slunk behind, with lolling tongue. In his arms John still carried the kittens, and on his shoulder perched the raven, while Blanche trotted behind him.

It was indeed a strange sight. A hush came upon the hall, and every one stared open-mouthed as they passed along. At last the King himself, who was sitting with bent head, noticed the silence and glanced up. John,

with his queer group, was now almost at the foot of the throne. The King started up with a cry of rage and surprise. He glared at the lad and at the animals with blazing eyes. "What does this mean?" he shouted.

But at that moment John himself gave a cry. He had seen a figure that he knew, and, forgetting all else, he was hurrying towards it. At one side of the throne stood the Hermit, pale and sad, with his hands tied behind his back and a rope about his neck. He was guarded on each side by a man with a drawn sword.

"My father!" cried John, throwing himself upon the good man's neck before the wondering guards could interfere. At the same time Brutus gave a loud bark of joy and leaped upon his master.

"My dear son!" cried the Hermit, with tears in his eyes. "I thought not to see you again!"

At the sound of his voice the cat gave a loud "Miaou!" and ran to him. The kittens squeaked and tried to climb his gown. The bear growled contentedly and trotted to his side. The wolf leaped to him with fierce plea-

sure. The raven hopped to his feet with a scream of joy, and the carrier pigeon, with a soft "Coo!" fluttered to his shoulder. To the watching men and women of that court it seemed a miracle.

For a moment all was silent. Then the King found voice. "What does this mean?" he cried again. "How have this vagrant and his vile beasts found entrance to my palace? It is the hour for execution, not for mummery. Why is not the signal given?"

"O King," said John timidly, "they let me in because I said that I came to cure your son, if may be."

"More sorcery!" howled the King, beside himself with rage. "Take him away! Slay them all, — the old man, the boy, the animals! I have waited too long already. Perhaps even now my son is dead!" He rose, trembling.

But the Hermit's voice rang out now, loud and clear. "O King," he cried, "enough talk of sorcery and magic. This boy has come to help your son, who sought to slay him. He has brought the animals whose lives you covet, to show you how much you may owe to them.

Lo, this carrier pigeon bore my message bidding him to come,—not for my sake. For I told him nothing of the danger in which I lay. This noble dog guided him to the village by a path which only he could follow. Now with these other animals he hopes to amuse the Prince and awaken him to life. There is no magic in this; only love, O King — the love which is lacking in your sad and sullen kingdom."

There was a murmur in the crowd, which swayed forward toward John and the Hermit. For some seconds the King stood speechless, staring at the Hermit and the group around him. Then, with a wave of his hand, he bade the guards stand back. He turned to a black-gowned man on his right who had just entered the hall. "Does my son still live?" he asked in a choking voice.

The doctor nodded gravely. "He still lives, Sire. But he is very low. He cannot survive many minutes."

The King paled. "Let us hasten," he said. "It is the last chance. Perhaps the boy has skill." Then, turning to the little group of

people from the forest, he beckoned grimly. "Come with me," he said. "Save my son's life, and you save your own. Otherwise I swear that you shall all die the most hideous and painful of deaths."

Descending from the throne with tottering steps, for the King had grown a feeble old man, he led the way from the great hall. Behind him came the doctor and the Hermit. John followed, with the animals in his arms and close about his heels.

So they came to the door of a room in one wing of the palace.

XXII

THE PRINCE'S CHAMBER

AT the door the King paused and turned back to the little company which followed him.

"You may enter," he said, "and try your skill on the Prince, who is near to death. If you cure him, I will give you whatsoever reward you may demand. But see that you do not fail!" The King's voice was full of menace. "Enter, in the name of whatever magic you use."

"In the name of love we come," said the Hermit gently; "and in the name of love we shall do our best for your son, O King. Enter softly, John. You must do without me now. Leave our larger, clumsier friends outside with me."

Softly John tiptoed over the sill, carrying the kittens in his arms, with the dove on his shoulder, and the white cat following behind.

In the centre of the room was a couch, hung

with a splendid canopy of purple and gold. Beneath a purple coverlet fringed with gold lay the Prince, white as the lace of the pillow on which his black curls rested. His eyes were closed, and he looked still and lifeless. The hand which lay outside on the purple velvet was as white and transparent as the hand of a marble statue.

On one side of his bed sat a doctor in a black velvet gown, and several attendants stood about with long faces and tired eyes. On the other side of the couch a little girl crouched on a low stool. She was a pale, pretty little thing, younger than John, and her dress of brilliant red made her sad, dark eyes look all the more sorrowful as she gazed at John wistfully. It was Clare, the Prince's only sister.

As they entered the room the King made a sign to the doctor, who shook his head sadly. The King crossed to the bed and bent down over his son, touching the cold face. But it did not change. Neither the lips nor eyelids trembled, and John could see no sign of life in that still body. How different, he thought suddenly, from the vigorous figure which had

wrestled with him in the forest. How different that face from the one which had looked back at him triumphantly after the arrow had struck the poor deer!

"He does not hear nor see," said the King gloomily. "He scarcely breathes. What will you do?"

John hesitated. He had made no plan; he hardly knew with what hope the Hermit had summoned him and his pets thither. It seemed a hopeless task.

The King frowned at his daughter. "Why is this girl allowed here?" he said gruffly. "Leave the room."

"Oh, Sire," pleaded the little Princess, with tears in her eyes, "please let me stay! When my brother is so ill, surely my place is at his side. I will be quite still, indeed I will. Only do not send me away!"

John looked at her and thought how like a gentle little animal she was, so timid, and with such large, beseeching eyes. John had never known any little girls. Now he thought they would be very pleasant things to have in an animal kingdom.

"Please let her stay, King," he said gently. "She can do no harm."

"Very well. Let her stay," said the King impatiently. "But what will you do? What magic have you, boy?"

Suddenly John had an impulse. He stepped forward with the squirming kittens and laid them on the velvet coverlet close by the Prince's marble hand. The doctor arose with a cry of horror; the attendants rushed forward. The little Princess drew a long breath. But the King raised his hand.

"Let the boy alone," he commanded. "Even this madness shall be humored. There is no hope now but in him."

The kittens began to frisk and gambol about the velvet, and the old cat, with a contented purr, jumped up beside them. She was tired, poor thing, and glad to find a soft bed. At that moment those who were watching saw a change come upon the Prince's face. His eyelids quivered. His lips moved slightly. The King raised his hands and trembled.

Then began a frolic upon that royal bed such as for ten years had not been seen in

all the kingdom. Up and down, around and around, the kittens chased one another. They rolled over and over, kicking and biting. They played with their mother's tail. They scampered over the still body of the Prince himself, and one of them, coming to his hand, began to play with the white fingers, nibbling at them and licking them with warm little pink tongue.

And what happened? Slowly the Prince's eyes opened. For a moment they gazed blankly at the frolicking kittens. Then his lips gradually parted, and the flicker of a tiny smile came upon them. The King clasped his hands over his eyes, and gave a cry of joy. The little Princess laid her head on the pillow beside her brother's and wept silently.

The kitten which was playing with the Prince's hand rolled over on its back and began to kick at the royal fingers. A tiny red scratch appeared on the milky skin. At the same moment a bit of color came into the Prince's white lips and cheeks. He turned his head, and lifting his hand stroked the soft ball of fur. The little thing responded immedi-

HE STROKED THE SOFT BALL OF FUR

ately, arching its back and beginning to purr. Presently the Prince's other hand stole out from under the coverlet. He drew the kitten feebly to his face and rubbed his cheek against the silky fur, and he smiled!

The doctor turned to the King. "He will live," he said. "It must be magic!"

"He lives! My son lives!" cried the King, bending over the Prince in a transport.

The Prince opened his eyes and looked at him, and a change came upon his face. The smile faded, and he closed his eyes wearily.

"Your Majesty," said John, speaking gently, "if you will allow me to give the Prince a healing draught which I myself have made from life-giving herbs, I think now he will sleep and waken refreshed."

"Do as you will!" cried the King. "Whatever you wish shall be done in the palace. Whatever you ask shall be given."

With a word and a gentle touch John roused the Prince, who swallowed the draught which the boy gave him. "Now let us leave him to sleep," said John.

But when they would have removed the

cat and kittens, a cloud came over the Prince's face, and his hand wandered feebly, as if craving the touch of the silky fur.

"We will leave them here," said John. "They are what he needs."

"Oh, let me stay too!" cried the little Princess, with shining eyes.

And across the room she and John smiled at each other, as he nodded, saying, "Yes, O King, I pray that you will let the little maid stay."

So they withdrew from the chamber, and left the Prince to dream with his new friends sleeping about him, and the little sister with her head upon the pillow at his side. And all night long he slept like a baby with a smile upon his face.

The Prince's cure had begun.

XXIII

THE CURE

THERE was wonder and excitement in the palace, for the news of John's success had been told from mouth to mouth. The King ordered the Hermit's chains to be removed, and he and his pupil were treated with utmost honor. But they refused all gifts which the monarch made them; and he was annoyed.

In the morning John and the Hermit went once more to see their patient. They found him and the little Princess playing with the kittens, and both looked up with a smile when the visitors entered. But at sight of John the Prince's color faded and the smile died on his lips. John bore the white pigeon in his hands, and going to the bedside bent over the Prince with a gay manner.

"You are better?" he asked.

The Prince's eyes looked into his wonderingly.

"Why do you try to help me?" he asked. "Once I tried to kill you."

The little Princess gasped.

"I came to heal and help you if I could," said John, laughing. "I brought my pets to cheer you. See, here is the dove of peace. She brought me the message which has saved your life. Will you not love her as I do?"

He placed the bird on the Prince's breast, and with a gentle coo the creature nestled there confidingly. Tears came to the Prince's eyes.

"You are very good," he said. "I tried to kill your pets in the forest."

"O brother!" cried the little maid, clasping her hands with a sob. "How could you!"

"Let us forget that," said John brightly. "Let us be friends. You will get well and learn to love the animals for their own sake."

"Oh, yes!" said the little girl. "I never saw any before, but how can one help loving these dear little pets, — and the lovely bird?" She stroked the white feathers tenderly.

But the Prince covered his face with his

hands and seemed to be weeping. "I cannot forget!" he said brokenly.

John felt very uncomfortable. "If only I could make him laugh, now!" he thought. Then an idea came to him,—a funny idea which made his eyelids quiver and the brown spot wink.

With a twist of his body he suddenly stood upon his head at the foot of the Prince's couch, and, waving his feet in the air, began to walk about the chamber on his hands. The Prince uncovered his eyes and gazed in astonishment at such antics.

Presently John regained his feet, and kissing his hand began to turn somersaults vigorously all about the apartment. The little Princess clapped her hands and began to laugh. The Prince watched him, fascinated. Presently, as John's high spirits broke out into fuller pranks and gyrations, the Prince's lips quivered. He began to grin.

"Oh, you are a tumbler," he said. "I am glad you have come here! Do it again."

So John did it again; and this time the Prince, watching him, echoed the gay laugh

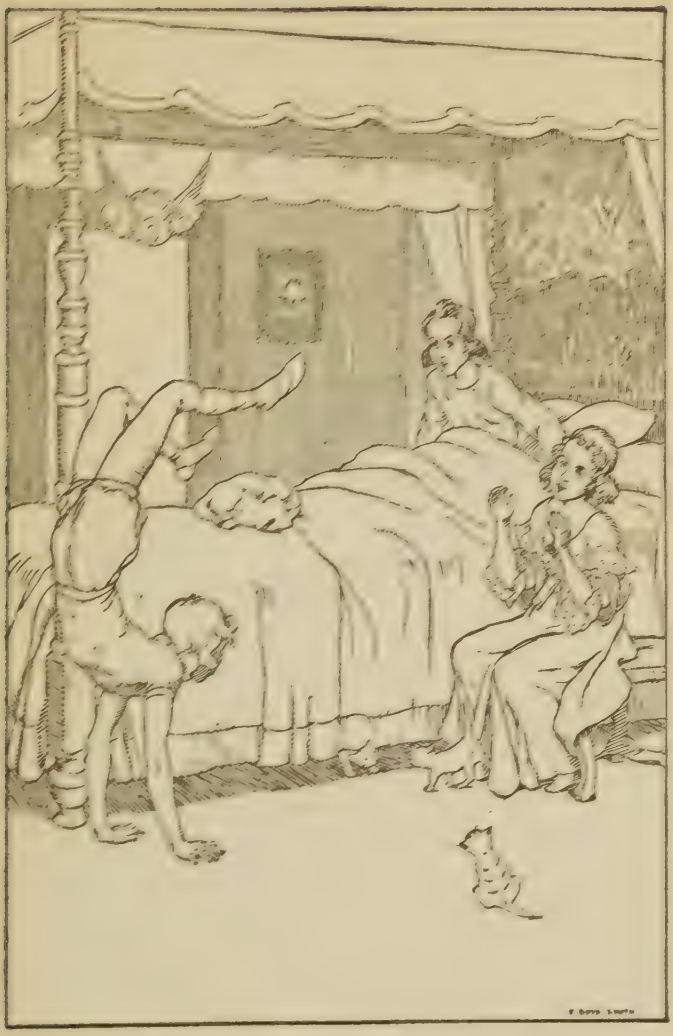
of the little Princess. "It is as good as a play," he said, feebly wiping the tears of merriment from his cheeks. "I wish I could do it myself!"

"You must get well first," said John, laughing.

"I will try," said the Prince, with a new spirit in his tone. And from that moment he began to grow stronger.

Now came days when the palace was much happier than it had been for years. The presence of the animals was in itself a joy to the King's people, long starved for the lack of pets. And John's sunny face and quaint smile were reflected on all about him. There is nothing so catching as good humor, and John started an epidemic which spread through the palace, and indeed through the whole city. No one knew how it happened. But before long the flaxen-haired boy was the pet of the whole town. Not only was he welcome always in the Prince's chamber, but every door at which he knocked opened gladly to him, and he was at home wherever he went.

Only the King held aloof. He had grown



I WISH I COULD DO IT MYSELF

strangely grim and sullen since his son's cure was assured. The King was jealous.

What with the animals to play with and John's tumbling, the Prince was continually in gales of laughter, and every day he grew plumper and more rosy. Sometimes it was Brutus who amused him; often the cat and kittens, his first friends. The raven became a great favorite after his introduction to the Prince, which happened in this wise.

John had delayed to bring the bird into the royal chamber, he was so mischievous. But one day when the Prince seemed very merry, John slipped out and fetched the black fellow on his shoulder. On being invited to do so, the raven hopped gravely to the foot of the bed, where he perched, eyeing the Prince with little round eyes and head cocked knowingly.

Presently the bird gave a queer screech, and began to imitate John's own laughter so exactly that the Prince shook with mirth. At this the raven stood upon one leg gravely, and began to sidle along the footboard of the bed. Presently he spied some fruit carved on the wooden uprights, and making a dart began to

peck at the pears and peaches. Then, discovering his mistake, once more he began to chuckle, this time so heartily that he seemed ready to have a fit. And as he listened the Prince's mouth widened and he burst into roars of laughter.

"Hush, you foolish bird!" said John reprovingly. "Be not so noisy in a Prince's chamber. It is not good manners!" and he threw his handkerchief over the raven's head.

But the Prince protested. "Let him do his pleasure," he said, laughing. "I have not seen anything so funny for many a day. I shall teach him many tricks."

So the raven stayed with the Prince, and learned many tricks. And the carrier pigeon stayed. And the others stayed,—all but the wolf, who would never leave John,—making themselves quite at home on the Prince's velvet couch. And the little Princess played with them, enjoying the happiest hours of her life.

One only of the animals the Prince had not seen. The Hermit and John agreed that until he was stronger he must not see the bear whom he had once tried to kill. For they

knew that now it would make the Prince sad and ashamed to remember that day in the forest. Such a change had come upon the young man! He was no longer hard and cruel, but tender and affectionate.

The King felt the change, and it made him angry.

XXIV

THE KING

DAILY, as the Prince grew stronger, he became more and more devoted to the animals, to John and the good Hermit. He could scarcely bear them out of his sight. When they were with him his face lighted with smiles, and he seemed to blossom as a flower does in sunshine. Only in the presence of the King he grew silent and sad once more. The light passed from his eyes as he looked at the grim old man. A visit from the King was almost enough to undo the good effects of a whole day of happiness.

The King knew this, and it made him furious. He did not see that it was his own fault; that it was the badness in him which made the Prince shrink. He thought it was the doing of some one else. He grew to hate the Hermit and John and the animals, of whom his son and daughter were so fond. In his heart he cared little for any one. He had never loved

the Princess Clare, and the Prince was dear only because one day he would be king. Yet Robert hated to see them love any one else.

The King was resolved to put an end to this state of things as soon as might be. But he dared not do anything yet for fear of causing his son to fall ill again. He sat and brooded and planned in his wicked heart what he would do when the Prince should be well once more. And for him the time went slowly which others found so happy.

Of all this the Prince and John guessed nothing. For the King seemed to them no more gruff and grum than usual. All the wishes of the strangers were regarded, and they were treated like distinguished guests in the palace. But the Hermit kept his eyes open. And one other was not blind to the King's hatred. Clare, the little Princess who had never been loved by her father, knew the meaning of the black looks which he sometimes cast upon the two forest-comers, and her heart was uneasy, for she loved them both.

The Prince grew so much better that he could walk about. One day he was lying upon

his couch in a balcony overlooking the royal park. The Hermit sat close by, reading aloud from the book which he was teaching the Prince to love, as he had taught John. The little Princess bent over her embroidery frame at the foot of the couch, and John himself, on the floor at her feet, was playing with Brutus. The other animals and birds were straying about the balcony, or lay cuddled in the Prince's lap. John thought how like this scene was to the Animal Kingdom in the woods; yet how unlike. And he glanced from the Prince to the Princess with a smile of content. It seemed hardly possible that this was the land where no pets were allowed; where hunting was the favorite sport of the King and his son!

Suddenly, in a pause of the reading, the Prince put out his hand.

"Friends," he said, "you have taught me many things in these weeks that you have dwelt under this roof. You have cured me; you have made me laugh. I have been thinking much of late how it is that where you come folk are happy. Your faces make the world smile. How different from my father and me! We have

always made every one weep. There has been something wrong, I know not what. No one loves us, — not even Clare here."

"O brother!" protested the little maid, "I have always loved you. But never so dearly as now, when you have grown so kind."

John spoke gently. "You will change all this when you are king," he said.

The Prince shook his head. "No, they will never love me as they do you. I would fain be different, but I can never be like you, John. You should be king, not I."

John laughed. "And what would become of the Animal Kingdom then?" he said. "My father and I have been talking together. We must soon go back to our woods and our little friends there."

"Oh, you must not go!" gasped the Prince, turning pale. "You must never leave me! I can never again be alone with the King!"

He looked so terror-stricken that the Hermit and John were silent for pity.

"I have been thinking," went on the Prince gravely, "that when I am king, if that time ever comes, — and they say that it must, since

there is no other son of our house,—I shall need much help, for I am weak and not wise. You, good father, I would have you for my counselor. And you,"—he laid his arm affectionately on John's shoulder,—"you shall be my brother and share the throne with me."

"Nay, thrones cannot be shared thus," said the Hermit, looking at both boys with some agitation. "You are a king's son. But we are of the woods, my Prince. I at least have other work to do. As John says, there is the Animal Kingdom—what is to become of that?"

"Why, there will be no need for you to go to find it," answered the Prince eagerly. "When I am king all shall be changed. This shall be the Animal Kingdom. There shall be no more hunting or killing here. There shall be pets,—more than in any other land. For I have seen how unhappy are folk who live without them."

"Now God be praised!" cried the good Hermit, with tears in his eyes.

And John embraced the Prince heartily, while the little Princess clapped her hands and cried with shining eyes, "Oh! we shall all live together forever and ever, as happily

as if this were the lovely forest which is John's home."

"Nay," said the Hermit gravely, "I cannot live here. I must go back to my woods. I have vowed never again to live away from my Forest Kingdom. But you, John, have taken no vow. Will you stay here with the Prince, or will you go back with me? Make now your choice."

John looked wistfully at the Prince and Princess, for he loved them well. He looked at the animals who crowded around him and seemed to be listening to his words. He knew how eager they were to be back in the forest. He looked at the Hermit.

"Oh, stay!" cried the Prince. "Stay and be my brother, and I will make you rich and powerful."

"Oh, stay!" begged the little Princess. "Stay and be my brother, too!"

But John shook his head. "I cannot stay," he said. "If my dear father will have me for his pupil still, I will go back with him. For though it is pleasant here, I love best the life of the woods and the freedom of the forest.

And I long to learn what no one in this kingdom can teach me: the art of healing and helping, as did that good John whose name I bear."

The Hermit's face beamed like May sunshine, but he said nothing.

"Then I will go to the forest with you!" cried the Prince. "I will not stay here. I do not want to be king. I too would be free and happy in the Kingdom of the Forest."

"And I will go also!" said the Princess.

"Hush!" said the Hermit gravely. "That may not be. Your duty lies here. When you are king, my Prince, you can make your kingdom into a happy place. Then, little Princess, you will be proud of it and of him. Your duty is to the kingdom where you were born, and to the people of it, whom you can make happier and better. But perhaps, some day when I am gone to a still fairer kingdom, John will be able to help you, as another John once helped another King."

At this moment there was a noise at the window which led to the balcony, and the King stepped out to them. How long he had been

standing inside, how much of their talk he had heard, no one knew.

The Princess flushed; but the Prince turned pale as he greeted his father respectfully. John and the Hermit exchanged glances. They were not afraid for themselves, but they dreaded the King's wrath for his son and daughter, who had threatened to run away.

The King stood for a moment, looking at the group with a frown. Then a peculiar smile twisted his lips.

"Ah!" he said, "I have intruded, it seems, upon a council of State. I fear that I interrupt your plans, my son. But I trust that you and these noble visitors will pardon my desire to learn the state of your health. You must not be over-excited." He waved his hand toward the Hermit and John, then bowed low to each of the animals in turn, with bitter mockery.

The Princess trembled, for she saw how angry the King was.

"We have no secrets, my friends and I," said the Prince with dignity. "We have nothing to conceal of which we are ashamed."

The King looked at him quickly, as if sus-

pecting that his words meant some reproach. But he only said, "That is well." Then his manner changed. He tried to appear merry and genial. "And now, my son," he said, "since you are so much better, I wish to plan a festival in your honor, to celebrate your cure."

The little Princess looked at him quickly. She suspected some treachery. But the Prince seemed pleased.

"For me?" he said. "A festival in which these friends may share — these friends who saved my life?"

"Ay," answered the King, bowing to the group once more with a peculiar smile. "Surely, it shall be also in honor of these friends to whom we are so grateful." The Hermit and John bowed. The King went on suavely: "We will have a pageant, with music and games and singing. But chiefly the people clamor to see our young friend do the wonderful tricks of which they have heard. I myself would fain see what you, my son, have found so amusing. My lad," — he turned to John with a strange tone in his voice, — "you shall dance and tumble and put your animals through their paces, for the

applause of my people. I command you to appear before us this day week and do your sprightliest. It is not often that we have the honor of entertaining a mountebank at court."

He spoke the word "mountebank" sneeringly, and John flushed. But seeing the Hermit sitting with downcast eyes, he merely answered: —

"I shall obey your Majesty's commands."

"Then that is settled," said the King, with a grunt of satisfaction. "And you," — he turned to the Prince, — "you will then be strong enough to sit at my side on the throne. It is well."

He quite ignored the little daughter who with a pale face shrank in one corner. With one last glance at the group, the King swept from the balcony.

"A fête!" said the Prince, clapping his hands. "A grand fête in your honor, my kind friends. That will be rare sport! John, you shall make the whole city laugh, even as you have cured me."

"I shall do my best," answered John. "Yes,

I will teach some of my little friends new tricks for that fête." And he laughed as he thought how the Prince and Princess would stare when they saw Bruin dance.

John and the Prince left the balcony arm in arm, to talk over the plans for the fête. But the Hermit still sat with bent brows, thinking.

"Why did he call John a mountebank?" he asked himself. "He hates us. He is planning some mischief, I believe. It is time we were back in our Animal Kingdom."

He looked up. The Princess was touching his arm and her face was very pale. "Father," she said, for so the royal children loved to call the good old man. "Father, there is mischief in the air. Oh! do be on your guard. For I think it would break my heart if anything should happen to you or to dear John."

The Hermit stroked her hair gently. "Dear child," he said, "we will take care of him, you and I and the animals."

XXV

THE FÊTE

THE day for the festival came at last. The Prince was now quite strong and well, and had taken a joyous part in the preparations. The palace was decorated with flowers; bands were playing, fountains splashing in the courtyard; banquets were spread at all hours for any one who would partake. The palace was merrier than it had been for years; and the centre of all the joy, the core of the day's happiness, was John. His praise was on every one's lips. His name, even more often than the young Prince's whose health they were celebrating, was spoken in love and tenderness.

But all this John did not seem to know. He only saw that every one was very kind; that the world might be a very happy place to live in, if love ruled the kingdoms of it. And he made ready for his share in the merrymaking with a light heart. It was great fun to play at

being a mountebank once more for the people who loved him! Yet he was not sorry that the next day he and the Hermit were going back to the kingdom in the forest. He was longing for the peace and quiet of the woods, and the little wild friends who awaited them there.

The King he never saw. That monarch seemed anxious to keep out of his way as far as possible. John did not know that he and the Hermit were being carefully watched by the King's spies, and that they were really prisoners in the palace. For they were treated honorably, and the King sent word that John must ask for whatever he wished to make his performance a success.

John asked for little. Upon one thing, however, he had set his heart. He had made for that occasion a tumbler's suit of green silk, with trunks of cloth-of-gold — just such a suit as Gigi had worn when he was one of the mountebank company. But the boy who pranced gaily about the palace in this gorgeous attire was a very different fellow from the sad-eyed little Gigi. John was tall and sturdy and full of life. His eyes sparkled with fun and good

humor, and looked at the world frankly as if expecting kindness from every one. So much had five years of love and humanity done for the little wanderer.

When John appeared in the courtyard ready for his performance, dressed in the familiar colors of long ago, he could not help chuckling to think how things had changed with him. Instead of Cecco and the Giant, by his side waddled the great bear on his hind legs; while Brutus walked sedately on his other side, and the gaunt wolf stalked behind.

The park was thronged with people, soldiers and citizens and peasants from the country, jostling one another for a sight of John and his pets,—and whispering among themselves with an excitement which John could not understand. For after all he was going to give a simple little show of tumbling such as they must have seen many times. "It is the animals," he thought. "It must be the animals that they are so eager to see."

John walked along, smiling into the faces which met his kindly, and the brown spot on his eyelid gave him the mischievous look which

always made folk laugh. It was amid a ripple of good-natured laughter that he and his pets made their way to the platform which had been erected in front of the palace. Here on a high seat sat the King, and beside him the Prince, with a flush of pleasure on his thin cheeks. Gaily dressed lords and ladies stood about the throne. But somewhat apart and surrounded by his pets sat the Hermit in his gray robe, with folded arms. His hood was pulled over his face so that John could not see how grave he was. Two armed men stood behind him, but by his side, with her hand on his shoulder, was the little Princess. John smiled at her, when he bowed low to the people on the platform. And the little maid answered with a flash of affection; but her face was very pale, and her hand trembled on the Hermit's shoulder.

John led forward his animals and they began their tricks. The Hermit saw the Prince start when Bruin appeared. Evidently he recognized the animal which he had once tried to kill. Merrily John urged the clumsy fellow to dance, and every one laughed heartily

JOHN URGED THE CLUMSY FELLOW TO DANCE

at the sight. Only the King sat grim and sullen.

Then John put a plumed hat on the bear's head, took his arm, and the two strutted about the platform like a pair of dandies. The audience burst into roars of mirth. Even the Hermit's sides were shaking, and the little Princess rocked to and fro with merriment.

Straight up to the Prince marched the twain, and at John's command the bear bowed and held out his hand politely.

"He salutes you, his brother," said John to the Prince. "He begs you to be friends with him always."

The Prince bowed in return, with a bright flush in his cheeks. "I salute you, brother," he replied. "Never again will I hunt you or any animal, wherever I may be."

From the foremost of the crowd who heard these words came a loud "Hurrah!" and caps were tossed in the air. Evidently the Prince's sentiment was popular in the city.

"Tut, tut!" said the King, "we will see about that!" He bit his lip and bent a frown upon the group before him. The Hermit saw

him whisper a word into the ear of one of his courtiers, who bowed and disappeared.

Now John put Brutus and the wolf through their tricks, which were wonderful indeed; for the dog was very intelligent, and had learned all that the best educated dog nowadays can do, and more beside. Then the wolf's leaping was a thing to wonder at, he was so lithe and strong. Over Brutus he leaped, over John's head, over the bear, over John standing on the bear's broad back.

At the end the Prince applauded heartily, and calling up the dog and the wolf, placed a golden collar about the neck of each.

"Good friends," said the Prince, "you helped to save my life, you and your brothers, and your masters. I give you these. But them I never can repay if I live to be as old as Noah, who was the first to gather pets about him. I hope that in time there may be many pets throughout the kingdom."

He glanced timidly at the King.

"Hurrah!" shouted the people. "Long live the Prince. Long live John and his animals! Hurrah! Hurrah!"

"No more of this!" The King made a gesture, and the shouting stopped, changing into sullen murmurs. The King was not popular, it seemed. "Let the performance proceed!" he commanded. "I do not like these interruptions."

Once more the Hermit saw him whisper to a servant, who went away quickly on some mysterious errand.

Now, with a happy face, John himself stepped forward and showed his skill and strength and grace. He turned somersaults backward and forward; he stood upon his head and danced upon his hands. He did all the old tricks which he had learned of the tumblers, and more of his own invention, till the people shouted rapturously, "Bravo! Bravo! Hurrah for our John!"

With his eye on the Prince, John began to caper at his merriest. He danced high, leaping like a grasshopper, and seeming to bound like thistledown. All the while his eyes twinkled, and the people laughed with delight.

"Bravo! John, bravo!" shouted the Prince, clapping his hands. "Come here and let me

decorate you, my friend." And as John bowed before him the Prince placed upon his bosom a beautiful star of diamonds that gleamed and sparkled like a cobweb full of dew.

"Hurrah! Hurrah! Long life to John! John! John!" shouted the people, as if they loved the name.

And the Hermit saw that the King turned pale and shook with wrath at the sound. The next moment he grasped the arms of his chair and stared into the crowd eagerly.

Suddenly he arose, and, waving his sceptre, commanded silence. John bowed and turned to the King, waiting to hear his pleasure. But instead of the speech which every one expected, they saw the King gazing down into the crowd before him, and on his lips was a malicious smile. But he looked very old and sick, and he tottered as he held to the arm of his throne.

XXVI

THE TALISMAN

JOHN turned his head to see at what the King was staring. There was a movement in the crowd. Men were being elbowed forward. A noise of harsh voices arose, and to the platform crowded three figures in rags and tatters.

They forced their way directly in front of the platform, and stood staring up. John stepped forward to see what it meant, and in a moment fell back with a cry of dismay. He was looking into the eyes of Cecco, Tonio and the Giant!

"Hi! Master Gigi!" cried Tonio's hateful voice; "so here we find you setting up as a tumbler on your own account. Your Majesty," he cried, appealing to the King, who was listening with a wicked grin on his face, "this is our boy. We own him. He ran away, but he belongs to us. Give him to us again!"

The little Princess screamed and clung to

the Hermit's arm; but he sat motionless, watching. The people began to murmur and jostle the three strangers. But the King raised his hand, and they listened to him.

"We will hear these men," he said. Then, turning to John, he added smoothly, "And after that, sirrah, you shall answer for yourself."

The Hermit rose and took a step forward, still holding the little Princess by the hand. Brutus broke away from the page who held him, and crouched growling at John's side.

Then Tonio raised his voice, and cried louder, pointing at John with his skinny hand. "He is our boy," he said. "We taught him his trade; let him deny it. Now he is robbing us of our fair dues. He is a runaway. Give him back to us!"

Still John stared at him, too dazed to answer. But the Hermit took another step forward, and said sternly: —

"He is your boy, you say. How did you come by him?"

"We bought him for a gold piece," they said in chorus. "That was years ago. For ten

years he traveled with us. And then he ran away. His life is ours; let him deny it if he can!"

John stood silent, horrified at the fate which seemed to confront him. For in those days children who were bought and sold in this cruel way were the slaves of the masters who had purchased them.

The Prince had fallen back, pale and trembling. But the King now spoke again, gazing with malicious eyes upon the two wood-folk whom he hated.

"What have you to say for yourselves?" he asked. "You who do not deny that you are a runaway; you, old man, who stole the lad and must be punished most severely therefor, have you any reason why I should not give the one of you up to these mountebanks, his lawful masters, and the other of you to punishment and death? Speak!" The King's voice was harsh and cruel. His eyes glittered fiercely.

Still John was silent.

"Seize him!" commanded the King. "Seize them both! Off with them to prison!"

The guards stepped forward, unwillingly

enough. But at that moment John drew himself up. His eyes flashed; he grasped in both hands the staff over which he had made the wolf leap, and braced himself for defense.

"They shall not take me!" he cried. "I will not go with them. I will die sooner. To me, my brothers!" and he gave a shrill, peculiar cry by which he and the Hermit were wont to call their pets.

Instantly the Hermit ranged himself at John's side. At the same moment Brutus placed himself, barking and growling, before the twain. Breaking from the leash by which he was held, the wolf came leaping towards them, and stood bristling beside the dog, showing his terrible fangs. With a savage growl Bruin burst his chain and came lumbering to the defense of his friends, and the three devoted animals made a stout and terrible wall about them. But this was not all. From the corners where they were crouched came running the other, gentler pets. Here scampered the cat and her kittens, mewing pitifully. Across the platform hopped the raven. The carrier pigeon fluttered to the Hermit's shoulder.

TO ME, MY BROTHERS!

And from the trees all round about came winging, with a call answering to John's, a flock of birds who had followed him from the forest, and who had been hidden in the forbidden trees of the King's park until this very hour. They fluttered like a cloud about the heads of the pair, so that one could scarcely see them.

Every one stood amazed; even the King sank back in his seat, stupefied. The guards fell back with lowered weapons. The crowd was silent, staring open-mouthed. Then a murmur arose, and words passed from man to man.

"A miracle! It is a miracle! They must be God's saints!"

But Tonio was not long silent. "Tricks! Tricks!" he cried. "Gigi has become an animal-trainer. But he is our boy still. Give him to us!"

"Seize them!" repeated the King in a choking voice.

Once more the guards made a rush forward. But the animals leaped up and stood at bay so fiercely that they dared not come nearer.

The Hermit raised his hand, and there was sudden silence. He faced the King and spoke sternly.

"O King," he said, "you see that they will never take us alive. In sight of all these people will you add more deaths to your record?" The murmur of the crowd grew louder. "Nay, all has not yet been said," he went on. "Listen, O King. You judge too quickly. There is not proof enough of the lad's ownership."

"Not enough?" snarled the King. "I say there is enough and to spare. Can this boy dispute the words of these men?"

John now looked at the Hermit eagerly. His heart beat with hope of something, he knew not what.

The King sneered. "You see!" he cried triumphantly.

But once more the Hermit held up his hand. "Will you not question these fellows further?" he asked. "Dare you hear more, O King?"

"Dare I!" blustered the King, "and why not, pray? If there be more to say, tell it," he commanded the mountebanks.

"Ay," they answered eagerly, "we can indeed prove that the boy is ours."

"Tell how you came by him," interrupted the Hermit, in a tone not to be disobeyed.

Tonio answered sullenly: —

"We have told already. We bought him for a gold piece, of a fisherman on a distant coast. He had found the babe, nearly dead with cold and hunger, floating in a basket on the sea. It was a castaway, a foundling; no one wanted it. We took it away with us, and had hard work to make it live."

"Is that all?" asked the Hermit. "Was there nothing to prove that this is the same child?" He said this in a loud voice so that every one could hear.

"Proof!" cried Tonio, shaking his fist at John fiercely. "Who can mistake him in that suit, the very one we gave him? Look at his mop of yellow tow and his eye with the brown spot over it. No one who has seen it could forget that spot. Ay, there is still another way to prove him ours. I see the gleam of silver around his neck. He still wears the chain and the bit of silver which he dares not remove,

because there is magic in it, they say. It was on his neck when the fisherman found him. Look, and see if we do not say truth!"

John still stood motionless, looking in the Hermit's face. But at these last words the old man stepped behind him and drew the silver talisman from the boy's breast, laying it out on his green silk bosom, where it glittered for all to see.

Cecco and Tonio and the Giant gave a cry of triumph. But from the crowd behind them rose a murmur of different meaning. Men began to crowd forward eagerly.

"Yes, look!" cried the Hermit, pointing at the medal. "The Cross of the good man John, the friend of King Cyril! Which of you does not know and love it?"

The murmur of the crowd swelled into a shout,—"Who is he? Who is the lad? We will know!"

"Who but John," answered the Hermit, with kindling eyes. "Who but John, the good man's son,—my brother's son. I know, for I christened the child, and I saw the King hang this Cross about the baby's neck, a Cross like

the one he had given John himself. This is the child who disappeared fourteen years ago. The King sent him away to be killed. But the servant to whom the task fell was less cruel. The child was set adrift on the ocean, and escaped as you have heard. Will you let him be lost again?"

"No! No!" roared the crowd. "He shall not go! He shall not go!" And they seized the three mountebanks and hustled them away.

With a shout the King's own guards rushed forward to help in this matter. There was a cry at the back of the platform. The King had fallen in a fit. But few at the moment were thinking of him. The people were throwing up their caps and dancing joyously.

"John! John!" they shouted. "We knew the silver Cross which the holy John always wore when he went about doing good to us. Oh, we remember now! We shall never again forget! John! Hurrah for his son John!"

John himself stood bewildered, and the animals around him shivered and looked surprised. They were not used to such tumults. Suddenly John felt his hand clasped softly. The little Prin-

cess was at his side, looking up in his face and smiling through tears. "Dear John!" she said. "Now you are safe. Now you will be our brother indeed!"

"Yes, he is safe," said the Hermit, embracing the boy tenderly. "My John! My brother's son! Oh, how I have longed to tell you and claim you for my nephew! But I vowed that I would wait until you had proved yourself worthy of him, worthy of the name by which I christened you. And you are worthy, O my dear John, even to wear the silver Cross!"

"I do not understand yet," said John. "Who am I? And why do the people shout my name and seem to love me so much?"

"You are the son of John, the holy friend of the people," answered the Hermit.

"But you, my father, — for so I must call you still," said John; "who are you, and how came you to be living in the forest?"

"I was but a humble servant of God," said the Hermit. "But when King Cyril died, and my brother and you were gone, there was not happiness for me in the city of sorrow. I became an exile. I fled to the forest with the

hunted animals who were my brother's friends. And there I made a home for them, a kingdom of my own, with Brutus for my prime minister. And there, after many years, you came to find me, my dear son! It was a miracle!"

Now the Prince came forward and laid his hand timidly on John's shoulder. "John," he said, "now you know how less than ever you have reason to love the rulers of this land. But oh, John! I beg you to forgive us. Be my brother, John; and if you can forget, let me be your friend!"

"My brother and friend!" cried John; and the two hugged each other affectionately, while Brutus leaped up and licked the face first of one, then of the other, and the other animals frisked joyously.

"Hurrah! Hurrah!" shouted the people. "They are like good King Cyril and his friend the holy John. Let it be so! Let it be so! Hurrah! Hurrah!"

CONCLUSION

AND so it turned out to be. For soon the old King died, worn out by wicked passions, and Prince Hugh became King. Then began a new order of things. The land was now a happy kingdom, full of love and peace. Like his uncle, the new monarch became known as the Good King. In his realm was never hunting or cruel sport. The houses of his subjects were full of pets. And the palace itself was a perfect menagerie, so that John called it "The Ark." There were hundreds of new four-footed friends in the park and palace; and hundreds of two-footed friends in the trees and dovecotes. To and fro they went between the city and the forest. For all ways were safe now to wandering creatures. A highroad was made connecting the King's city with the Hermit's wood. And the path to the door of the hut was worn smooth. For this soon became a favorite place of pilgrimage.

THE KING AND PRINCESS CAME TO VISIT HIM

There in the Forest Kingdom lived the good Hermit and John his nephew, with their circle of pets. And these also went back and forth between the forest and the city. For John was the Prince's dear friend and companion, and spent many weeks of the year in the palace with the two whom he loved. His pets were as eagerly welcomed there as he. Brutus had his own rug by the young King's fireplace. The wolf made a faithful guardian of the palace gate, while John was inside. Bruin wandered about the halls at his pleasure. The cat purred contentedly on the brocade furniture, with ever-new kittens frisking about her. The raven often perched on the back of King Hugh's chair and made wise sounds. And while waiting to carry a message to the Hermit in the forest, the carrier pigeon loved to nestle in the arms of the young Princess, who grew prettier and prettier every day.

To the Kingdom in the Forest came folk from everywhere. The quiet of the Hermit's retreat was often broken. But nevertheless the old man was happy. For he saw his boy fast growing into the man he had hoped him to be,

the copy of his father, beloved John. With the silver Cross on his bosom, the strange, merry smile ever on his face, and a kind word always on his lips, John ministered to all who needed him; and he went far and wide to find them. He was always happy, whatever he might be doing; alone with the Hermit and his animal friends; helping the troubled and the ailing; wandering with Brutus and the wolf through the still lonely parts of the wood; studying the never-failing wonders of the Kingdom in the Forest. But he was happiest of all, perhaps, when the King and Princess came to visit him, as they loved to do, — without servants or followers, with only an animal or two. For this country was the safest and most peaceful in the world.

Then they would all dress in simple green and brown and go out into the forest to ramble and to become acquainted with the wild creatures. There they met the old friends of the wood who had not gone with the others on that famous pilgrimage. And the deer, the fox, the squirrel, the rabbits, and the birds were always glad to see them.

Here John could teach the young King to

tumble and turn somersaults to his heart's delight, without any one to say, "How undignified!" For whatever the friendly beasts and birds thought of these antics, they never spoke critically of the matter.

Here also John taught the Princess the secret lore of the forest, so that she became almost as wise and skillful as he. But no one could say, "How unladylike!" For she grew sweeter and dearer every day.

And the good old Hermit watched them always with loving eyes.